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Sensing the next battle: An overshadowed prehistory of creative dissent in Tunisia

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Abstract

When analysing the Tunisian uprising through its aesthetics, the premonitory and subversive agency of the artistic sphere becomes intelligible. This contribution, therefore, engages in a reconstruction of an often overlooked local and historical sequence of aesthetic contention and asks if this sequence prefigured the Tunisian uprising. This seditious premonitory subversion grew into a generalized practice as it emerged into full daylight during the liberation phase of the uprising as an important mediator of the fundamental changes the country was taking itself through. The specific practices that structured the aesthetics of Tunisian uprising were thus already formed a decade before the self-immolation of Tarek el-Tayeb Mohammed Bouazizi. This insight is not only fruitful in relation to the ongoing debates reconstructing the historical dynamics that preceded the revolution, but also gives important insights into the visionary subversive dynamics the artistic sphere is still engaging in today, maybe sensing the next battle coming.

Keywords

aesthetics, premonition, subversion, symbolic power, Tunisian Revolution

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Jetez les prisons en prison
La parole sera délivrée
S'élèvera alors le chant des réchappés
Un déluge est à venir.
Et la parole est captive.
('Open the doors' by Basset Ben Hassen)[1]

Even though the signs of a coming political crisis were abundant, few, if any, were able to predict the sudden outbreak of a revolution (Figure 1). Ben Hassen's poem, published about seven months before Mohammed Bouazizi's ordeal, reflects a premonitory sensibility, a feeling of that change about to come that was not captured by political and social scientists. To most observers, the revolution came as a surprise. While the purpose of social sciences is not to 'predict' such events, the government of Tunisia was mainly perceived in academia as a strong and resilient authoritarian order (Zemni, 2016: 133). Even if in hindsight some scholars can recall a prevailing premonition of inevitable change, no one could know when major change would happen, nor could they foresee what would trigger such a profound political movement. Revolutions, however, do not 'suddenly' appear but always start from an enduring 'molecular accumulation of movements and collective action' that point to a specific prehistory (De Smet, 2016: 180). While scholars have tried to specify the role of formal political parties, civil society institutions or informal mobilizations and social movements, few have taken into account the different forms of contestation that, from the 2000s, gradually undermined – through (artistic) subversion – the symbolic power of the Tunisian regime engrained in its personality cult.

Forms of dissent in the more informal and artistic spheres and among the more marginalized parts of society were often overlooked as political and social scientists were mainly focusing their attention on the repression of organized oppositional forces in the formal sphere of politics (Khiari and Hibou, 2011). Blinded by the presupposed resilience of the authoritarian state and the ensuing premise that the regime controlled every inch of society, the ripening of alternative political spaces and informal and extra-institutional activities that dared to face the increasing political repression, were easily overlooked (Chomiak, 2011). These blind spots have their origin not only in the lack of scholarly attention for the role of imagination in politics to transcend the study of institutional routines (Mamdani, 2011) but also in the effectiveness of different interconnected mythologies that sustained an exceptional image of Tunisia (Cavatorta and Haugbolle, 2012). The symbolic and non-discursive dimension of authoritarian power and the extreme personalization of power, often times approaching the grotesque, were central elements in the construction of what Hibou (2006) then aptly calls a 'Tunisian fiction'.

Together with its symbolic mediation in the form of a spectacular personality cult, the Tunisian fiction obfuscated a reality of growing economic inequality, excessive state violence and alienation from traditional morals and religious references; it also overshadowed existing dynamics of resistance. The ambiguity of the state's symbolic representations paradoxically not only allowed the circumvention of state censorship but also facilitated creative dissent. In the decade preceding the revolution, the personality cult

Figure 1. Destruction of 7 November Square, Tunis.
Source: Photo by Mohamed Rais.

and its spectacle were subverted in numerous subtle ways, both making visible the growing discrepancy between the Tunisian fiction and the reality of state oppression, and prefiguring the iconoclastic liberation phase of the revolution. Engaging analytically with the personality cult of the Ben Ali regime will allow us to see the contentious ways in which the cult was diverted, and people prepared to attack, as the symbols of social order became symbols of revolt and liberation (Fanon, 1963 [1961]). The revolution could indeed be read as a 'campaign to dismantle Ben Ali's cult of personality' by the 'destruction of displays of political power', that as 'rudimentary acts of collective defiance' were a precursor for the demand for the autocrat's departure (Chomiak, 2013).

This contribution offers an account of how citizens, activists and/or artists expressed creative dissent and mobilized for political change through the subversion of symbolic power engrained in the personality cult and its spectacle. In doing so, it aims to illuminate the relations between different forms of creative production and changing social and political dynamics. The Tunisian fiction was mediated through the image of the personality cult, but, conversely, it could also be demystified by subverting the images that made up its personality cult. A close analysis also reveals how the increasingly ubiquitous personality cult invited transgression (Wedeen, 1999). Focusing on the prospective rather than the retrospective agency of activists and artists in the decennium before the episode on the barricades (Sakr, 2013), the proposed reconstruction of the prehistory of political dissent does not aim to label the revolutionary process as 'an ex-post inevitability' (Zemni, 2015). While a certain predictability is to some extent inevitably restored through a retrospective teleology (Dakhlia, 2011), the genealogy outlined here aims at moving our gaze to the crucial role played by the ambiguity of symbolic power, a role it still plays today in the constitution of a post-revolutionary body politic. By revisiting the optimistic energy of creative dissent, this reconstruction also hopes to counter the growing disillusion when analysing the current outcomes of the revolution.

Ambiguous symbols of power

The revolution did not come from nowhere (Khiari and Hibou, 2011). Creative dissent not only reflects social change but has also the potential to foreshadow deep political shifts and help to bring them about (van Nieuwkerk et al., 2016). The seeds of the revolution can be found in various art forms before 2010, expressing the bleak reality behind the regime's façade (El Hamamsy and Soliman, 2013). Frantz Fanon (1963 [1961]) already claimed that an attentive reader can sense and even see the next battle, manifested in exceptional forms of expression and themes enacted through artistic interventions imbued with mobilizing power. As stated by James C. Scott (1990: 212), behind every revolutionary movement lies 'a long prehistory, one comprising songs, popular poetry, jokes, street wisdom [and] political satire'. Each subversive intervention creates a new layer of popular memory, nourishing the repertoire of an ongoing liberation movement.

Different academic accounts witnessed a flow of discontent from the end of the 1990s. Most scholarly attention was given to the various ways poetry (Hamdy and Rice, 2016; Omri, 2012) literature (Sakr, 2013), humour (Geisser, 2001; Meddeb, 2013), theatre (Amine, 2013; Ruocco, 2013; Zahrouni, 2013), cinema (Barlet, 2012; Gana, 2013; Lang, 2014; Mannone, 2015) and music (Bouzouita, 2013; Gana, 2013) anticipated the revolution in their own right. However, none of these accounts systematically scrutinizes transversally, beyond the prevailing disciplines, the subversive power of creative dissent. Academic readings of the Tunisian Revolution engaging consistently with power structures engrained in the symbolic sphere of the regime, are rare; let alone accounts that settle into the question of how people subverted what Lisa Wedeen (1999: 145) calls 'symbolic disciplinary power'.

When research does consider the theatricality of power and the fiction it performs as a disciplinary device and a mode of governance (Hibou, 2006), it is often caught in a deterministic relation between the symbols it analyses and the production of legitimacy, charisma or hegemony, neglecting the problem of reception (Wedeen, 1999). To fully consider disciplinary symbolic power – namely a subsystem of coercive power that recognizes that power is generated through its representation, and that symbols can function as disciplinary devices that enforce compliance – we have to consider its ambiguity in the sphere of both domination and resistance. Domination not only produces the apparent consent of the people, but also plants the seeds of rebellion (Ayari et al., 2011). As stated by Frantz Fanon (1963 [1961]: 53) 'The symbols of social order […] are at one and the same time inhibitory and stimulating: for they do not convey the message "Don't dare to budge"; rather, they cry out "Get ready to attack."' The spatial concentration of power produced by the Ben Ali regime around a personality cult to fashion regime-obedient citizens, likewise, made it the primary site for political dissent (Chomiak, 2011, 2013; Tripp, 2013). The personality cult and its spectacle enforced the image of an omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient president. Power is, however, never absolute nor indivisible, let alone unconditioned, but is always mediated by a network of intermediaries, encompassing nearly the whole of society (Hibou, 2006). Guy Debord (2000 [1967]: 4) already pointed to the 'spectacle' as not merely a collection of images but as 'a social relation between people that is mediated by images'. An essential feature of this

all-encompassing relational entanglement is a general atmosphere of ambivalence or ambiguity (Hibou, 2006; Wedeen, 1999). Symbolic domination is thus not unidirectional, but multiple and diffuse. The state exercises its power inside society through relational processes of subjugation that allow power to be exercised (Hibou, 2006). At the same time, there is space within this entanglement for what Nouri Gana (2013:198) calls 'constructive ambiguity', that is, the possibility to raise questions about the regime's policies indirectly, without mentioning its moral values and by doing so ignite controversy and debate. Symbolic power can be received and reproduced, but also questioned and even turned against itself. Taking into account the ambiguity of symbolic power, makes it possible to see the in-between space where, 'political vitality resides and where critique and oppositional consciousness thrive' (Wedeen, 1999: 89).

Central in the ambiguity of symbolic power is the contrast between the intended regime representations and the ways in which such representations are received, negotiated and reinterpreted (Wedeen, 1999). From the 2000s, attentive observers noticed the first signs of what Kilani (2000) formulated as a 'divorce between the official discourse and daily reality'. The accumulation of diversions of the Tunisian fiction formed a 'hidden transcript', that is, a growing unofficial structure of feeling, with its own dialect, humour and poetry, opposing the prevailing 'public transcript' of the apparent official structures and their mediations (Scott, 1990). The importance of analysing this broadening gap between hidden and public transcripts cannot be overstated, as in hindsight it can be considered not only a critical indication of where and how opposition takes place, but also one of the main drives actuating the revolution (Joffé, 2011).

Aziz Amami (in Meddeb, 2013: 31) suggested how deconstructing the symbols of oppression and ridiculing the cult of personality was an effective way to counter state censorship and 'break down the wall of appearances'. In what follows we will closely analyse the reception of the personality cult in the decade before the outbreak of the revolution. As political research in general, and materialist analysis specifically, altogether fail to acknowledge the role symbolic power plays in daily life, there is a general lack of clear-cut concepts and suitable methodologies to analyse precisely the role of symbols in producing political power. We will focus on specific modes of counter-conduct and ambivalent forms of dissent already present in the years leading up to the revolution. More specifically, we will scrutinize different ways the three central elements of the personality cult of the Ben Ali regime were diverted, as these subtle practices were largely ignored due to their silenced and occulted location outside the official and formal political sphere.

Novemberist dispositif

From the outset, 7 November 1987, the regime presented its new president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, as 'the Craftsman of Change', symbolically distancing the new ruler from his charismatic predecessor, erasing all citations and public references to the legacy of the first leader of the liberated nation, Habib Bourguiba. Starting from the newly constituted '7 November, National Pact', to the erasure of Bourguiba's portrait from public space and the national currency, to the unbolting of monumental equestrian sculptures, the regime engaged in a process of 'debourguibization' (Saidi, 2007: 211). Whereas

Figure 2. 'Sept foi c'est fini 2' by Hicham Driss.

Bourguiba's historic legitimacy and charismatic leadership created a symbiotic relationship between himself, the state and the people (Lacouture, 1970), Ben Ali's acute lack of charisma and political eloquence stimulated the imagination of the regime. The image of Ben Ali was initially build around two formally elaborated original elements: the date of the constitutional coup '7 November' and the traditional Phoenician purple colour (Figures 2 and 3). Eventually, with increasing confidence in the resilient structure of his leadership, a classic presidential portrait was added to the repertoire (Figure 4).

Through the naming and branding of state services and public properties, the presidential imagery was officially disseminated to permeate the whole of society. The strength of this well-rehearsed Novemberist dispositif – referring to the various institutional, physical, administrative mechanisms and the knowledge structures which maintain the exercise of power – was its capacity to reproduce itself. The symbolic imagery reproduced itself in a complex interaction between power and the people, between the hegemony of symbolic power and its interiorized elements; whether through fear, calculation or opportunism. Its main ingredients, the reference to 7 November, the colour purple and the image of the president – were not just produced by the state's institutions

Figure 3. 'Sept foi c'est fini 1' by Hicham Driss.

but also, whether through gentle pressure or not, by private companies, businesses and shop owners wanting to pledge allegiance to the president by hanging Ben Ali's portrait, the bigger, the better. Not showcasing Ben Ali's portrait became suspicious and could entail severe bureaucratic, financial and juridical troubles, even violent incarceration. References to 7 November and the colour purple were also excessively used in the marketing of private companies in recognition of the people close to the president's inner circle who had helped them in providing services for their businesses (obtaining a professional licence, access to a bank loan, obtaining access to land and/or properties …). Employees donned purple ties in the hope of promotion while guests of honour wore purple scarves, if not purple suits, skirts or caftans, to mark their allegiance. During 'elections' public buildings and infrastructures (railings, bridges and even whole houses) were repainted in purple. Artists regularly reproduced this symbolic power in their artwork. Purple paintings with seven doves, or mosaic portraits of the president were awarded official prizes while the purchase commission of the Ministry of Culture, massively bought artworks without ever publicly exhibiting them, except in the private palace of the president in Sidi Dhrif. In summary, reproducing the political imaginary

Figure 4. The president and his portrait.
Source: Fethi Belaid (AFP).

became a symbol of affiliation and loyalty, gently imposed by the ruling party and reproduced in different layers of society. This 'spontaneous' reproduction became gradually more intense during Ben Ali's years in power.

Even if the three elements of symbolic power of the Ben Ali regime are interwoven, we will analyse separately the reference to the day of Ben Ali's accession to power (7 November 1987), his favourite colour purple as well as his portrait, and show how these elements were gradually being questioned, contested and subverted by a growing number of artists, a process that ultimately led to the 'tearing up' of the constructed image of the 'Tunisian miracle' during the revolutionary events of late December 2010 and early 2011.

Novemberist diversions

In 2007, when Tunisia celebrated twenty years of Ben Ali's rule, scholars expecting pompous splendour and wildly enthusiastic festivities were disappointed by the mere repetition of the annual commemorative routine (Geisser and Gobe, 2008). The political context surrounding the festivities, such as a rising jihadist threat and the increased visibility of state corruption, demanded sobriety in extravagance. The magic of the first 7 November rituals, gave way to a flat and formal mise-en-scène and a meticulously staged state performance. This disappointment missed, however, the growing dynamics of dissent against the ritualized celebrations and the subversions of 'commemorative routines'.

For the regime's 20th anniversary, digital activist Sami Ben Gharbia subverted the founding document of the Novemberist regime, the 7 November declaration of 1987. In

the alternative declaration, '7 November as we experienced it', Ben Gharbia (2007) tackled several taboos, inspired by the way the people really experienced the 'Tunisian Miracle', criticizing state corruption, the failure of the juridical system and police oppression. On the same day, the first edition of the Dream City art biennale was launched without official authorization. Instead of joining the celebrations of the 'Era of Change', artists reclaimed public space and occupied the old Medina of the capital with different subtle interventions, installations and performances. On social media, Hamadi Kaloutcha created the popular platform 'Against the ridiculous number seven cult', to document all the references to 7 November in public space and unveil its ridiculousness. As nearly 3500 participants gathered online to engage in political discussions mocking the regime, the online platform was quickly shut down by the state. Whereas for the 20th anniversary the ruling party still bothered to mobilize 'the masses' by chartering coaches, the following year the television coverage of the presidential speech revealed how it misled its audience. A very small audience was framed in vain as a fully packed '7 November Stadium'. In contrast, two days later the same stadium was filled to the brim for the final game of the national soccer championship (Chomiak, 2013). During derbies between the two major teams of Tunis, the Club Africain and l'Espérance de Tunis, the crowds always filled the space, sometimes singing songs subtly defying state authority (Beau and Tuquoi, 2011). The hooligans of the different teams generally did not fight against each other, but against the police state (Hussey, 2014).

The Novemberist subversion gained momentum in the late 2000s but was nothing new. In 1997, an anonymous pamphlet entitled *The Seven Families who Plunder Tunisia* was already distributed, convincingly showing how wealth was concentrated in the hands of seven families surrounding the president (Beau and Graciet, 2009). Referring to 'The Seven Families' gradually became a generalized way to voice dissent against state corruption (Kilani, 2000). Neither did the strategy of numerical diversion stop after the 20th anniversary celebration. On 7 November 2009, blogger and cartoonist _Z_ published a cartoon mocking the bizarre purple sectarian dynamics, depicting different affiliated figures venerating a wooden totem, with the face of Ben Ali with a 7 sculpted on his head at the top (_Z_, 2009a). For the next celebration, in 2010, _Z_ explicitly addressed 'the endless 7 November Carousel', tackling the never-ending 'Change' advanced by a regime that, paradoxically, had not changed over the course of 23 years, 'stuck in a time warp by a metaphysical accident' (_Z_, 2010a). When the Windows 7 operating system became available, people joked that even Microsoft was aligning with the regime. Not only multinationals were 'suspects', locals also had to be careful.

A butcher who named his shop the 'Butchery of 7 November' created national commotion. The insulting connotation of the well-intended tribute was so much debated that the butcher could not but rename his shop (Auffray, 2011). This popular story inspired Nadia Kaabi-Linke's installation 'Butcher Bliss' (2010), which was exhibited in a show, 'The Future of a Promise', during the Venice biennale that year. By showing imprints of animal stomachs cast in porcelain, Kabi-Linke refers to the bodily repulsion many already felt towards the regime, and which came to the surface as some had the 'guts' to speak truth to power.

The clock tower on the main 7 November square in the capital, the quintessential Novemberist symbol, was evidently not spared. In a context where the Ministry of

Figure 5. *Cinecittà 7* – Ibrahim Letaïef.

Culture officially only subsidized seven cinematographic productions per year the film *Cinecittà 7* by Ibrahim Letaïef (Figure 5) came over as a critique of the official imagery, indicating how this imagery is closely linked to the distribution of means and benefits. Disguised as a comedy, the movie sharply points at generalized state corruption, mocked up by a closely monitored and controlled representation of Tunisian society. In tribute to Fellini's *La Dolce Vita, Cinecittà* deliberately choose to cut off-frame the phallus of the regime, showing only a kissing couple in the fountain at its base. To push through its political engagement, the film officially came out in exactly seven different cinemas over the country. The clock tower is also a central component of the novel *Al-Gorilla* (Figure 6) by Kamel al-Riahi, which quite directly anticipated the coming uprising (Sakr, 2013). From the first page, al-Gorilla climbs up the tower on 7 November Square to announce the coming intifada. Through the oneiric storyline revolving around the Gorilla hanging from the monument, the novel addresses societal problems such as marginalization,

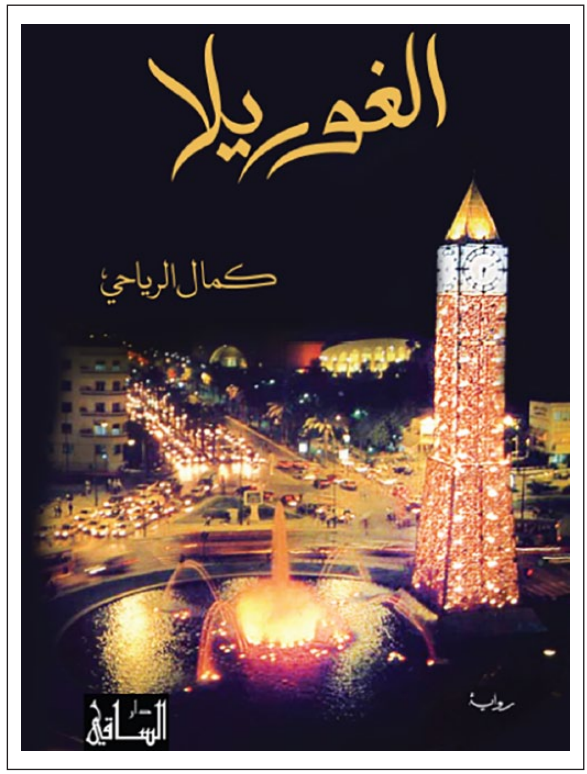

Figure 6. *Al-Gorilla* – Kamel al-Riahi.

political repression and torture of opposition members by an ingenious totalitarian surveillance system.

For the last celebration of the anniversary of 'Change' in 2010, the Byrsa movement led by Slim Ben Hassen tried to boycott the festivities. Under the slogan, 'On 7 November 2010, we will not celebrate the past. We will celebrate the future', the movement organized a counter-event in Paris to celebrate the activist youth and debate of the 'the Tunisian question', in the hope that the festivities in Tunis would be deserted and 7 November changed into a day of dissent. The *coup fatale* was given by the young rapper 'El General', who on 7 November 2010 uploaded 'Rais le Bled', a song directly addressing the president to critically denounce the state of affairs and calling for justice, social equality and freedom of speech. Despite regime attempts to get the song offline, it quickly spread through new media all over the country, and, thanks to Al Jazeera, far beyond.

Purplitis

Il se murmure, dans certains bars et à partir d'une certaine heure,
qu'il y aurait d'autres couleurs que le mauve.

Figure 7. Bayram Kilani – Bendirman.

> Des dictionnaires non autorisés, vendus sous les manteaux,
> prétendent que le pluriel de couleur existe.

The above citation is an excerpt from 'The mystery of colours', the first episode of the online graphic novel 'The Amazing Bendirman' (Figure 7) introducing the mysterious purple figure (Kilani, 2009). Bendirman is a superhero living in a country where the existence of other colours than purple is the biggest taboo. BendirLand, a monochromatic land where people sing 'Life in purple', is the only country in the world with a 'Ministry of Re-colouring'. His main mission is to find out if any colours other than purple exist. Bendirman was the figure behind which the popular protest singer-songwriter Bayram Kilani was voicing criticism. His name, obviously modelled on Super- and other Batmans, refers to the traditional '*bendir*' or hand drum. Tunisians use the term *tbandir* or drumming to refer to singing the praises of the powers that be (Meddeb, 2013; Omri, 2012). Bendirman is, as such, a sarcastic critique of all those who did not defend other colours than the one in power and reproduced symbolic power behind a semblance of goodwill and engagement.

In *Tunisia Friend. 300 days of sun, 1400km of beaches and 3000 years of history*, visual artist Aicha Filalli tackled the official tourist imagery of the Ben Ali regime. Her installation was exhibited at the Ammar Farhat gallery in June 2008 and consisted of 20 randomly aligned suitcases, accompanied with a travel directory subtly subverting the official touristic marketing discourse. Every suitcase is carefully covered with a different collage, integrating photographs of everyday scenes, but always referring to touristic imagery. The brochure accompanying the installation, clarifies Fillali's intentions. When read between the lines, the brochure clearly addresses different pressing issues, such as the unstoppable wave of deadly migration to Lampedusa and the double standards in international mobility, or the instrumentalization of the feminist cause by a patriarchal authoritarian system, the restriction of freedom of speech and control through state propaganda, the prevailing economic malaise, the overall growing inequality and increasing state corruption. When opened, the suitcases, lined with a purple fabric, seem to be empty. Behind the touristic façade, lies emptiness, as the regime has hollowed out everyday life through thorough state control. For those adhering to the purple affiliation, there is no option left than to pack their bags and leave the country. In Mohamed Ben Slama's series of paintings *Trait-Portrait*, exhibited at the Kanvas Art Gallery in spring 2007, purple is also a recurring theme. In one of the untitled paintings Leila Trabelsi is depicted surrounded by seven purple angels eating her hairdo, standing behind her husband who sits on a chair with a skull instead of a head on his shoulders. On another painting, two

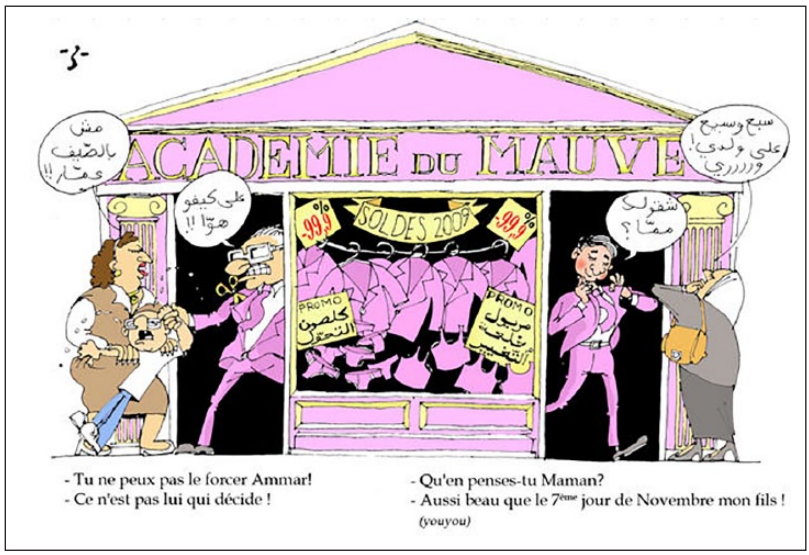

Figure 8. _Z_ Académie du Mauve.

purple angels are flying away with the king's head, between God and a Joker who states 'it is time to leave'.

Purple is also a recurrent style-element in the cartoons of _Z_. In the heyday of the Ben Ali presidency, which post-factum he baptized 'The Purple Years' (_Z_, 2011), the anonymous pen behind the DEBATunisie blog extensively reclaimed the colour purple to symbolize regime-adherence. It is in this light no surprise that _Z_ is the author of the first 'Purplespeak (Mauvlangue) dictionary' entitled 'La3rouss! 2010', published online by the editions of eternal joy to 'promote purple literature and culture in Tunisia and beyond' (_Z_, 2010b). From 'Ammar' to 'Zaba', the newly issued 'La3rouss' systematizes Purplespeak – a clear reference to newspeak, the ambiguous fictional language in Oceania, the totalitarian state in George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – to keep up general fluency in the vocabulary of regime-adherence. The dictionary teaches us the meaning of words like '*Tassfi9*', namely: 'A pavlovian reflex affecting people with purplitis, manifested by a sudden erection at the slightest perception of purple followed by frantic applause.' It clearly consists of 'scientific definitions based on etymological research', as Purplespeak is a language 'skillfully developed by leading purplelogues' of 'the Purple Academy'. The academy regularly organizes conferences that can be attended in their main building, situated on 7 November Avenue. When taking a closer look at the academy, it turns out to be nothing more than a clothes store where only one type of purple suit, 'the suit of Change', is sold (Figure 8).

The reproduction of the presidential colour always gained momentum as a decorative element in the run-up to presidential elections. People were relieved, as a popular saying goes, that the water coming out of the tap was not purple yet. Illustrative in this light is a cartoon series of _Z_ depicting Tibetan monks, aliens caught on picture by NASA, the

Figure 9. Tarik Mekki – *Elf Leila wa Leila* (video still).
Source: YouTube.

national union of the blind people (nearly falling into the abyss while demonstrating), but also the prisoners of Redeyef or the immigrants who were sent back from Lampedusa, even President Obama or the resurrected dead of the Djellaz cemetery, all dressed in purple in support of the re-election of Ben Ali in 2009 (_Z_, 2009b). When elections were next due to be held, the daily journal *Echourouq* published a call signed by 65 public personalities (doctors, lawyers, cultural figures, etc.) urging President Ben Ali to stand for re-election for the sixth time in 2014. The collective Nawaat (2010) relayed the information, naming and shaming the signatories of the call in purple and bold. Inspired by an advertisement image of an Italian clothing brand, the website made a counter-attack, spreading an image of Adolf Hitler in pink uniform with the sign of a loving heart instead of a swastika on his forearm, backed with the warning 'In 2014, Tunisia will be covered in purple.'

Ben Ali Baba and the forty thieves

During autocratic times, certain policies could carefully be criticized, but never those responsible behind these policies (Hawkins, 2011). Directly attacking the one who embodies the whole system was the most challenging strategy to subvert symbolic power. People therefore sought refuge in subverting the image(s) of figures close to the president. The First Lady was the undisputed star of popular humour (see for example Figure 9; Geisser, 2001), but harking back to the imagery of the first president of independent Tunisia was also a powerful way to voice dissent.

In the official imagery, the First Lady was supposed to embody the continuation of Bourguiba's progressive policies towards women. This feminist image was contested, as Leila Trabelsi seemed haunted by her former profession as a hairdresser, Tunisians jokingly referring to her career as one 'from hair dryer to power' (Du séchoire au pouvoir). 'The Regent of Carthage', her nickname, as a book title of Beau and Graciet (2009) reminds us, was a regular object of mockery. The most no-nonsense popular critique can

be found in the 2008 web series *Elf Leila wa Leila* (A Thousand and One Nights) by Tarik Mekki. The title was in itself was already a blow to the regime, as the name 'Leila' was barred from public broadcasting by the censors of the Ministry of Culture (Beau and Tuquoi, 2011). Even the use of a 'trabelsi glass', a traditional tea glass, was not allowed (Mannone, 2015). The message of *Elf Leila wa Leila* was clear: the president could not have been be aware of the state of corruption surrounding his presidential palace as he was totally bewitched by his nefarious wife (Kraidy, 2016). This sexist critique of power was common ground among dissidents (Allal, 2012). The enchantment allowed her and her family to play the Tunisian market to the hilt, resulting in huge amounts of profit. The sobriquet 'Leïla-djin' circulated thus not only in reference to the jeans she was proudly wearing in her role as feminist First Lady, but also to refer to her supposed magical powers. The popular sexist prejudices also ultimately exonerates Ben Ali, or at least puts his responsibility for the state of affairs in perspective. The bad reputation of Leila as a derivative of and outlet for popular discontent contributed, paradoxically, to legitimating the regime (Khiari, 2004). Mocking Leila Ben Ali could nevertheless be understood as a strategic deviation, a way to attack the supposedly untouchable president.

The masses related indirectly to the presidential imagery, not only through the image of his wife, but also through the reproduction of the icon of the man Ben Ali claimed as his spiritual father, Habib Bourguiba (Ben M'Barek, 2003). Evoking even an ounce of the legacy of Bourguiba during 'The Era of Change' was outlawed and nearly considered a form of treason. Both Bourguiba's word and image, the two foundations of his charisma, were banned (Kerrou, 2016). This prohibition was peculiarly hard, as Bourguiba was doubly admired by the people (Lacouture, 1970). He was not only the face of a historical liberation movement, but also served as a sensitive, disarming, familiar father figure. As the 'pater familias', he instituted a direct and familiar bond with Tunisians, making elections almost redundant (Khiari and Lamloum, 1998). From the moment Ben Ali took power, the few times Bourguiba was officially mentioned, he was instrumentalized to legitimize Ben Ali as 'his son'. This debourguibization policy was driven by the will to symbolically kill 'The Father of the Nation' (Saidi, 2008). April 2000 can, in this light, be pointed to as a turning point in the contemporary history of Tunisia (Khiari, 2003). Not the death of the 'Supreme Combatant' in itself, but the problematic way the regime dealt with his public funeral caused a general feeling of humiliation that delegitimized the existing regime (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015). During the funeral, the national 'Tunis 7' TV station broadcast a documentary about the life of sea snakes. The strong presence of police forces and the tightly orchestrated minimal ceremony prevented genuine collective mourning. The body of the former president was carried on a plane branded with the purple 7 November logo. As stated by Kilani (2000), the physical death of Bourguiba resulted in the political death of Ben Ali. Thousands of students dared to defy the ban on demonstrations, took the streets and chanted 'By our soul and our blood, Bourguiba, we will avenge you' (Geisser, 2000).

Different artists engaged with the image of the 'Father of the Nation' during the Ben Ali regime, defying the debourguibization policy. The photograph of the relocated statue of Bourguiba in La Goulette, central to Faten Gaddes's series *La Rue* (Figure 10), which was exhibited at the Ammar Farhat art gallery in 2009, not only shows the regime's wish to eradicate the historical event of national return in 1955 that the statue represents (Triki,

Figure 10. *La Rue* – Faten Gaddes.

2012), it also clearly illustrates the ongoing process of irreverent demarcation. The image of a bronze Bourguiba sitting on the back of his horse, apparently standing on the dilapidated and nearly collapsing construction site in La Goullette instead of a marble pedestal, is also testimony to the expropriation of some long-time residents of what was once known as Tunisia's Little Sicily for the benefit of lucrative real estate projects closely connected to the regime. The graffiti stencil of Wassim Ghoslani (2002; Figure 11), the Warholian screenprints of Bassem Jelali (Figure 12), the speed-painting of Selim Tlili (2010) or the painting of Mehdi Bouanani (2010; Figure 13) all show the dissidence engrained in the reproduction of Bourguiba's portrait during the 'Era of change'. Mehdi Bouanani painted different portraits of Bourguiba, together with the portraits of other world leaders, such as the overthrown Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. When he was invited to exhibit in a Tunisian art gallery in 2010, he was refused entry by the customs and his exhibition was cancelled.

The biggest taboo was to mention the name of the man who embodies the regime as a whole, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali himself. However, in the years leading up to the uprising, different terms of endearment came to the surface. After a fourth presidential term was secured through the performance of a constitutional referendum in 2002, the appropriate nickname 'Ben à Vie' was introduced (Ben Brik, 2003). Ben Ali never finished high school, but nevertheless succeeded in becoming General Director of National Security during Bourguiba's period in power, hence the surname 'Le général bac moins trois' (Beau and Tuquoi, 2011). Ben Ali Baba (and his forty thieves) was another running moniker, referring to the renowned orientalist tale of Arabian Nights (Sadiki, 2010). The most popular sobriquet was the acronym Z.A.B.A. often used by dissidents, such as blogger Zouheil Yahyaoui, who used it consequently on his 'TUNeZINE site' and alluding to the commonly used epithet 'Zebbi!', Arabic slang for 'Dick!' (Meddeb, 2013).

Figure 11. Portrait of Bourguiba by Wassim Ghoslani, 2002.

Tunisians were not only creative in finding terms of endearment for the president, but also in diverting the meaning of his ubiquitous portrait. Especially body language opened a space for whispered mockery by a growing part of society. As Ben Ali was usually depicted with one hand on his chest pocket, the inescapable image that was supposed to instil trust came to be a signifier of widespread bribery (Figure 14). Another reading warned the people they had better obey if they did not want to end in his pocket. A different portrait, depicting the president with folded hands to symbolize honesty and solidarity, was also read as a warning not to be crushed between presidential hands. The slogans accompanying the portrait were also commonly diverted. 'Ma3an Ma3a Ben Ali' (Everyone together with Ben Ali), the slogan of the latest electoral campaign was diverted to 'Mahma Ben Ali', (i.e. 'Ben Ali whatever it takes'). As soon as the intelligence service picked up on the subversion, the propaganda machine changed the slogan to the less ambiguous 'Kulu Ma3a Ben Ali' ('Everyone with Ben Ali'). 'Ben Ali ila al-abad' ('Ben Ali forever') was the main slogan of a group of young men in Gafsa who met daily in a

Figure 12. Portrait of Bourguiba by Bassem Jelali, 2010.

place they baptized as the 'Bar of subversion' (Allal, 2012: 835). They ironically used the English translation 'Forever Ben Ali' and nicknamed their own gang Jama'at Forever BA (The Forever Ben Ali Band).

Coercive networks of censorship prevented public subversion of the presidential portrait. However, Sami Ben Gharbia (2009) had the courage to post a daring picture on the Nawaat website depicting the face of Ben Ali mounted on the brawny torso of a body builder to illustrate the power needed to achieve a monster score like 89 per cent during the elections. The same year visual artist Samir M'kadmi installed a multi-screen video installation entitled *Liberating the Multi-voiced Bodies* in the frame of a street-level window in Oslo, confronting passers-by with the graphic erasure of Ben Ali's face. Starting from the slow but premonitory process of defacement, the work quite directly questioned the tenacity of the Tunisian regime and the steadfastness of the image of its autocratic ruler. Finally, the theatre performance *Yahia Yaïch* ('Amnesia') by Jalila Baccar and Fadhel Jaïbi that premiered in the centre of Tunis on 2 April 2010 is generally considered a visionary performance (Amine, 2013; Ruocco, 2013; Zahrouni, 2013). The powerful performance revolves around the almost suicidal way the head of state, named 'Yahia Yaïch', deals with his abrupt resignation. Notwithstanding it enacted more a top-down coup rather than a bottom-up revolt, the performance anticipated a fundamental

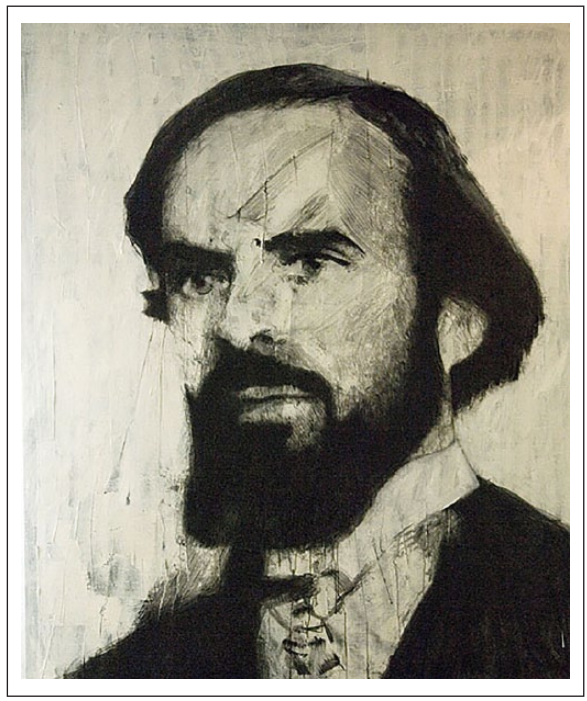

Figure 13. Portrait of Bourguiba by Mehdi Bouanani, 2010.

Figure 14. Poster of Ben Ali.
Source: Hamidededdine Bouali.

power shift through a meaningful subversion of the character of the powerful leading figure.

The next battle?

When analysing the Tunisian Revolution through the reconstruction of the ambiguous and relational dynamics of symbolic disciplinary power, and beyond the prevailing regime and state focus in most academic literature, the subversive, prospective and premonitory agency of the informal cultural and artistic spheres becomes discernible. Certainly from April 2000, after the physical death of Bourguiba and the ensuing 'political death of Ben Ali', the regime started to lose its legitimacy and the revolution became increasingly tangible through the molecular accumulation of creative dissent, that turned against itself the power subsumed in the personality cult of the Ben Ali regime. As the cult and its spectacle symbolically mediated the exceptional façade of the 'Tunisian fiction' made up of an entangled web of mythologies, the inflation of these creative diversions rendered visible the contrast between the intended regime representations and the ways in which these representations were received, interpreted and reinterpreted. It enforced an irreversible separation between the official discourse and daily reality, and by doing so broadened the gap between hidden and public transcript that, in hindsight, exactly indicated where and how resistance to the regime was taking place. It was not just tech-savvy youth who dared to take a subtle stance against the regime and its ambiguous symbolic power relations, some of the productions of the New Tunisian Cinema and the New Theatre of Tunis and the contemporary art field were to a certain extent premonitory of the Tunisian Revolution.

By reconstructing the prehistory of creative dissent, we did not aim to reframe the revolutionary process as an unavoidable historical event, but hope to point to the constructive role played by the ambiguity of symbolic disciplinary power in processes of resistance in authoritarian contexts. The retrospective genealogy of creative dissent made intelligible how the symbolic disciplinary power was subverted by the subversion of the three central elements of Ben Ali's personality cult in numerous ways. The use of the Phoenician Purple or the reference to 7 November was no longer simply a formal way to demonstrate one's adherence and allegiance to the regime, it was also extensively used by novelists, singers, filmmakers, theatre directors, cartoonists and contemporary artists to signify critical dissent. Less widespread was the subversion of the eventually confident classic presidential portrait. As naming the man who embodied the whole political system was often too challenging, indirect strategies to subvert symbolic power were found by relating to the First Lady and by harking back to the imagery of the first president of independent Tunisia. Closed structures of censorship generally prevented the visual subversion of the presidential portrait, though some eventually dared to subvert the very face of the autocratic regime, whether online or on stage in the municipal theatre.

This seditious premonitory subversion grew into a generalized practice as it emerged into full daylight during the first liberation phase of the revolution as an important mediator of the fundamental changes the country was taking itself through. The molecular accumulation of these subversive interventions during the 2000s was only fully

completed when the personality cult, together with the 'Tunisian Miracle' it represented, was torn apart. The previously obfuscated reality of economic inequality, excessive state violence and alienation from traditional morals and religious references was exposed to the whole of society. The violent and apparently 'sudden' collapse of the official imagery, and the subsequent laceration of the body politic then in place, created a moment for the repercussions of state oppression to vehemently emerge. This spontaneous iconoclastic chain of subversion produced new ways of seeing the political, until historical ideological formations were again set against each other, paving the way for a certain restoration of the old regime. Under the presidency of Beji Caid Essebsi, the regime tried – as already envisioned in his 2009 book titled *Habib Bourguiba: Le Bon Grain et l'Ivraie* (Habib Bourguiba: The Wheat and the Chaff) – to rehabilitate its historic neo-Destourian,[2] by reintroducing the symbolic power subsumed in the image of the 'Father of the Nation'. Despite the fact that society is still deeply affected by deep generational, regional and religious divides, a non-negligible part of the activist and artistic sphere did not lose its revolutionary core and is now actively challenging the ongoing symbolic process of re-bourguibization, maybe again sensing the next battle coming.

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Notes

1. Translated from Arabic by Hager Bouden (in Benslama, 2011).
2. Neo-Destour was a political ideology founded by a group of Tunisian nationalist politicians during the French protectorate to reinstate the country's first modern constitution. After independence and in line with President Habib Bourguiba's socialist orientations, the Neo-Destour became the Parti socialiste destourien in 1964.

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