Joachim Ben Yakoub on Digital Culture in 2018 & 2019

INTERVIEW The Editors 27/12/2018

Digitalization and digital culture are not only reshaping the world we live in, they also reshape social sciences and the humanities in particular. Diggit Magazine was curious about the impact of digital culture on academia. Now, at the end of the year, we at Diggit Magazine thought that we could use the traditional 'end-of-year question-format' as a pretext to seduce researchers from all over the world and from many different sub-disciplines to reflect on this impact, and to look back and forward.

Instead of the traditional end-of-year questions, we asked them about the impact of digital culture on their research practice and field of research in general. We of course also asked them what they expect to happen in 2019. The traditional end-of-year questions, but reinvented from an academic, and more specifically, a **digital culture** studies perspective.

In this interview, we ask Joachim Ben Yakoub to reflect on the impact of digital culture. Joachim Ben Yakoub is a researcher at Ghent University and lecturer at the Sint-Lucas School of Arts in Antwerp. He holds a master in social pedagogy and a PhD in political science. He just finished his dissertation, entitled 'Revolting Senses. The contrapuntal aesthetics of revolt in Tunisia'. He is affiliated to the 'Middle East and North Africa Research Group' (MENARG) and the 'Studies in Performing Arts & Media' research group (S:PAM) of the University of Ghent. His research is situated at the intersection of aesthetic theory and various postcolonial critiques, from where he investigates movements of revolt in Tunisia and Belgium.

When did you notice that digitalization was substantially reshaping your research field?

My research deals with the aesthetics of revolt in Tunisia. So, from the very beginning I was compelled to deal in one way or the other with the myth of the so-called "*Facebook Revolution*". So from the beginning, I was very skeptical about everything that had to do with digitalization. I am lucky I could rely on the knowledge of more experienced researchers like Miriyam Aouragh, who are specialized in social media and internet activism and shared crucial critical insights during the heat of the moment.

I am still really grateful Miriyam warned us about the still very present pitfall of orientalism and the importance of looking at the political economy of social media. Watching how the people in Tunisia stood up for dignity and freedom did not match the preconceived prism through which the Arab world was generally conceived.

> **The movements of revolt were understood as a reaction to civilized technology, and in this way prevailing interpretations denied the full agency of the damned body politic that stood up and risked their bare life in the name of dignity.**

Nevertheless concepts like the "Facebook Revolution" quickly found broad acceptance, fitting into the commonly propagated view of exceptionalism. Because of various reasons Muslims would be 'immune' to liberation and independence, ignoring the decades-long history of dissent and revolt in the global south. The Western media focused on the until then supposedly sleeping, non-violent, horizontal and tech-savvy youth, the new presumably secular but non-ideological generation that would have been "awakened" thanks to social media.

In the same line as the romantic and exotic representation of the tech-savvy youth, social media was glorified as the primum movens of the profound historical shift the whole continent was engaging in. Miriyam Aouragh explained how the myth of the "Facebook revolution" in this way reinforced some postulations, on how technology is an efficient means for "developing" and "civilizing", helping Muslims with their transition into modernity, away from tradition and towards more loosely structured networked individualism.

The movements of revolt were understood as a reaction to civilized technology, and in this way prevailing interpretations denied the full agency of the damned body politic that stood up and risked their bare life in the name of dignity. Preferring technology over agency, western public opinion and politics avoided dealing with the very issues many were protesting about, such as corruption, neoliberalism, and subservience to imperialism and post- or neo-colonialism and in doing so depoliticized our understanding of the movements of contestation, forgetting Tunisia was, until shortly before the ousting of Ben Ali, internationally renowned as an economic (neoliberal) success story.

There was a clear tendency to focus on certain virtual practices while neglecting more important dynamics, as for example the role of public space, social death and martyrdom as a mobilizing force in the protest. The emphasis on the role of social media in the struggle of the people furthermore whitewashed corporate complicity of infrastructural global agents like Microsoft, Google or Facebook or more national telecommunication companies as capitalist entities which are truly embedded in the authoritarian systems who created the social conditions of the revolt and who were at the same time sometimes literally complicit in state censorship, control, etc.

Can you give a concrete example of the impact of digital culture on your research domain?

Even though I used the internet and social media as a tool for my research, I took my precautions and distance to everything virtual. I didn't delve into the big question whether technology shapes society (technological determinism) or society shapes technology (cultural materialism), but contrasted the prevailing focus and even fetishization of the role of cyberspace in academia, with the necessity to look into the materiality of urban public space for the analysis of the unfolding revolts. Instead of focusing on cyberspace, I analyzed the embodied spatial and performative dimension of revolt.

The glorification of social media as the primum movens of the historical shift Tunisia was going through, virtually disembodied our view of a complex reality, allowing too often for the body to be neglected as a mediating instance. What is striking about any movement of revolt when looked at from the perspective of performance is its strong embodiment. Social media need bodies in the street as much as these bodies in the street require social media to exist on a global scale.

However, through the over-emphasis of the allegedly central role of social media, the embodiment of the revolution together with the violence and bloody sacrifice that conditioned these revolts are too often neglected. Notwithstanding that the Internet can indisputably be regarded as an important new communication instrument and one of the different

public political spheres of dissidence, I felt the need to reconsider the body not only as a site of biopolitical subjectivation, but also as a critical medium of political contestation.The performance of self-sacrifice during the heat of revolt was in that sense a potent form of disruption of the expected cooperation of the body within a biopolitical power constellation or even an extreme manifestation of necropolitical insurgency.

> **The glorification of social media as the primum movens of the historical shift Tunisia was going through, virtually disembodied our view of a complex reality, allowing too often for the body to be neglected as a mediating instance.**

The over-emphasized role of social media as the space of revolt not only tends to disembody, de-politicize and de-historicize our analysis, it also minimized the territorial placeness of revolt. I thus took into account the reciprocal entanglement between virtual cyberspace and physical public space.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge social media was one of the main mediators that helped deviate censorship and transmit revolutionary processes outside the surroundings of some of the newly freed symbolic urban places, such as the Kasbah Square or the Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis. I considered internet as one of the different media, mediating revolting senses, but also as an important space of dissidence, a cyberspace mediating content and affects, facilitating the formation of public political spheres.

Though most of the organizing was done offline and knowing that physical meetings are better for political planning and organizing and building trust, internet still was a powerful tool and organizing force. On the other hand the internet can indisputably be regarded as one of the different spheres of dissidence. Recalling an interview with a member of the Al-Aqsa group in Palestine, Miriyam Aouragh brought the assigned role of internet back to more realistic proportions and said: "*When Salah al-Din liberated Bait al-Maqdis (Jerusalem), he used pigeons to exchange information with his army leaders because it was the fastest means of communication. Now internet technology is.*"

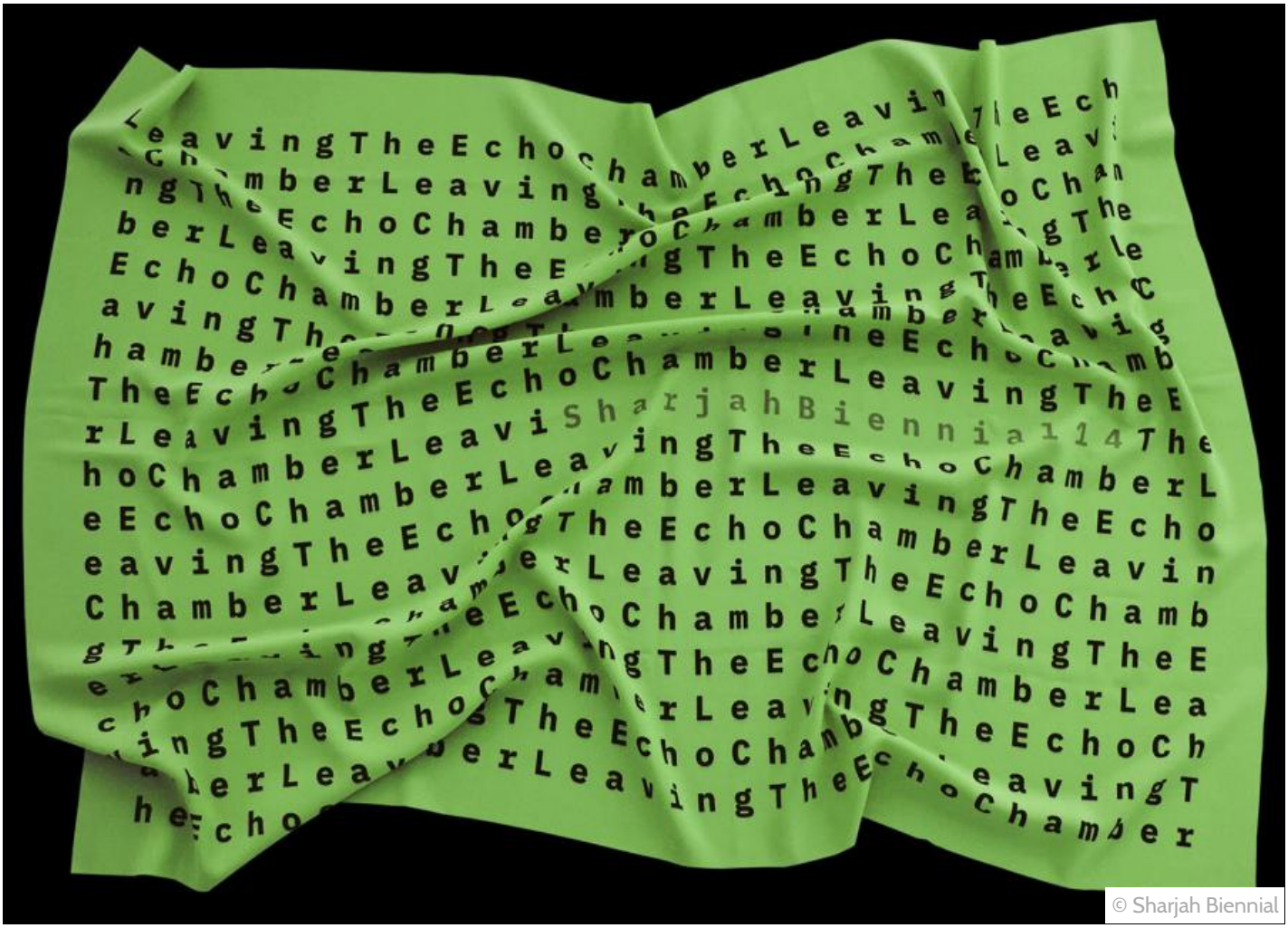
What was the most remarkable change in 2018 regarding digital culture and your research?

For me 2018 was not only the year I finished my Ph.D., but also the year I unplugged from social media, the year that I "left the echo chamber", as suggested by Zoe Butt, Omar Kholeif and Claire Tancons, curators of the upcoming Sharjah Biennale. It was crucial for me to take a break of social media, not only to make time and space to write up my dissertation, but also to think through the role of social media in my research, from the outside.

My research started with an online study exploring the Tunisian blogosphere, social media, video-sharing websites and online news platforms. By doing so I created a database of pictures, videos and texts related to the aesthetics of the different revolutionary flows. Employing cyberspace as a space of research, I was soon confronted with the impossibility of unplugging from my field site even when I was seated far away at my desk in Brussels.

Doing this sort of internet research certainly presents new challenges, for example in terms of dealing with the various ways I could move in cyberspace as a researcher and how these movements determine possible interactions with the field I was engaging in. As social media scholar Dhiraj Murthy reminds us, the internet should never be apprehended as a neutral observation space.

The social media handled to collect possible data always remain a dynamic and interactive fieldwork setting. Social networking platforms were useful for collecting data and thus for the initial mapping of a delineated field, but it is crucial not to forget that while I was connecting with activists and artists online I related with possible interlocutors I could observe online, before meeting and questioning them offline.



Sharjah Biennial 14: Leaving the Echo Chamber

The other way around, I also slowly became visible and thus observable in the field I was studying and I had to be aware about the various possible ways certain posts or likes could influence the image people had of my positionality. I really had to unplug and take the necessary distance, to post-factum justify methodologically my spontaneous exploration of cyberspace as an almost natural extension of my field site.

What do you expect will change in 2019 regarding the impact of digital culture on your research?

I am not sure. I am tempted to translate the theoretical frame I developed in Tunisia on the aesthetics of revolt to the Belgian context. At the same time I want to continue digging in the archive of dissent in Tunisia. Before going into academia, I worked for almost eight year in the 'Pianofabriek', a cultural center in Brussels, where I had the chance to work with displaced and diasporic artists. The engagements I started then, still have a huge influence on my academic and personal life today.

There too digitalization and moving in cyberspace were essential aspects of my work, so if I want to switch my research site, I will need to plug-in into social media again, to start my new research. I will have to be very precise in the way I will plug in again, which social medium I will use for which purpose, which connections I will make online, for whom I want to be visible and for whom I want to remain invisible.

In this context, I cannot overstate the importance of what artist Laura Nsengiyumva calls “radical presence”. Inspired by the homonymous historical exhibition that offered an overview of black performance within the visual arts over the last 50 years, Laura taught me how the internet can easily create the illusion that it would be possible to be present in many different places at the same time, creating a disembodied view on and understanding of social relations within activism.

Moving in cyberspace at increasing speed, it is easy to overlook the importance of embodied presence of seeing and even touching the other you relate with, certainly when engaging with diasporic art practices. Radical presence is then a condition for building up the necessary trust and even the needed love to make a collective difference in academia, but also in the arts, activism and in life in general.