

***Filming the Revolution* and its ability to reshape western narratives of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution.**

*Filming the Revolution*¹ is an interactive online archive created by Professor Alisa Lebow that focuses on independent filmmaking in Egypt in response to and following the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Described as a "Meta-Documentary"², it includes interviews with 30 Egyptian filmmakers and ties together different practitioners and their work. Lebow visited Egypt in the aftermath of the revolution at a time where the post-revolution euphoria³ had died down, to gain a reflective understanding of filmmaking surrounding the revolution. These interviews are divided into sections and linked together based on themes in a spider-web structure, allowing for the creation of virtual conversations⁴ between filmmakers. This essay will explore the relationship between *Filming the Revolution* and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, focusing on how it creates an alternative narrative of the revolution through the type of filmmaking it focuses on, its organization and its target audience. It will discuss the dominant western narrative and how the archive moves away from it by focusing on filmmakers' approach to "representing Egyptian Culture and Society"⁵ during and after the revolution, rather than social media surrounding the archive. The archive's lack of a linear structure and that to create this alternative narrative, it explicitly targets non-Egyptians as the audience.

Firstly, it is necessary to provide context on the 2011 uprisings and what followed. On January 25th 2011⁶, , thousands of Egyptians took to the streets, calling for the implementation of fundamental rights and the resignation of president Hosni Mubarak. They flooded into Tahrir Square in Cairo, followed by the streets of Alexandria, Mansoura, Tanta and many other cities

¹ Lebow, *Filming the Revolution*, 2018, DOI 10.21627/2018fr, "Introduction".

² Lebow, *Filming the Revolution*, Introduction.

³ Lebow, *Seeing Revolution Non-Linearly*, 279.

⁴ Lebow, *Seeing Revolution Non-Linearly*, 282.

⁵ Lebow *Filming the Revolution*, "About".

⁶ Al Jazeera, *Timeline: Egypt's Revolution*.

and towns around Egypt. Calling for liberty from the regime famously chanting "3eish, 7orra, 3adala igtame3eya", which translates into "Bread, freedom, Social Justice"⁷. Met with police brutality and violence, the Egyptian people stood their ground until Mubarak stepped down from office on February 11th 2011. Unfortunately, following this came the reign of Mohammed Morsi and power being given to the Muslim Brotherhood. A year after his inauguration, the people took to the street again to fight against his regime, and a day later, he was dethroned and replaced by the current president Abdel-Fattah Al Sisi⁸.

Between 2011-2013, the atmosphere was anything but calm; intense curfews, violence, and uncertainty grew in these years. Alongside this came a new wave of media production. Increased access to technology, compared to past revolutions, allowed people to easily document and upload what was happening on the streets for the world to see. From this came a western narrative that put social media and Tahrir Square at the epicentre of the revolution. Labelling it as the Facebook or Twitter Revolution⁹, it disregarded other forms of filmic activism and the nationwide fight against the regime. *Filming the Revolution* focuses instead on those "independent filmmakers and documentary"¹⁰, who may have been forgotten. Moving away from the media shared on social media and focusing on **people** in Egypt, whether in Tahrir, or other areas, and the many ways in which they revolted. This creates an alternative narrative of the revolution, putting people in the spotlight rather than a specific group, moment or form of media. This is important because reducing activist media to simply what was posted on the internet reduces those involved to the privileged few with access to these means. Egyptian filmmaker Philip Rizk explains that this generalization, leads to "protagonists of 'the

⁷ Baker, *Interview*, 227.

⁸ Kandil, *Timeline: 2013 revolution remodelling Egypt's Future*.

⁹ Tawil-Soury, *Shifting Spatialities of Egypt's politics*, 160.

¹⁰ Lebow, *Filming the revolution*, "About".

street”¹¹ being ignored. But, considering projects that focus on these people, such as *Out on the Street* (Jasmina Metwally and Phillip Rizk, 2015, Egypt) or *18 days* (Yasmin El Ayat Jigar Metha, 2011, Egypt) prevents this erasure.

Additionally, looking at a broader scope of people involved in the revolution further highlights the variety of actors and approaches to recording the revolution. The archive features interviews with "filmmakers, archivists, activists and artists"¹², who have different approaches to filmmaking but are connected through themes within their work, specifically their reflective documentation of the revolution. This includes many artists who found power in documenting the revolution away from Tahrir Square, such as, Marouan Omara and Tamer El Said.

Marouan Omara's interview clip "you don't have to film in the square to make a film about the revolution"¹³ addresses the importance of documenting the socio-economic effects of the revolution. His work documented the stories of workers who had to move to the coastal city of Sharm El Sheikh because of the economic toll that the revolution left behind. He expresses that from the outset, it wasn't meant to be a revolutionary film, but "the revolution is everywhere". Omara's work highlights the effects of the revolution on people outside of Cairo and shows that there's more to it than just Tahrir.

Moreover, the prevalence of footage of Tahrir, in western media, compared to other aspects of the revolution, is reiterated in Tamer El Said's interview clip "decided not to use the footage from Tahrir"¹⁴. In this, El-Said explains that they filmed 6 hours of footage in the square but

¹¹ Baker, Interview, 227.

¹² Lebow, *Filming the Revolution*, "About".

¹³ Lebow and Omara, Cairo, in *Filmingtherevolution.org*, , "you don't have to film in the square to make a film about the revolution".

¹⁴ Lebow and El-Said, Cairo, in *Filmingtherevolution.org*, "decided not to use the footage from Tahrir".

never used the footage within his film. He states that his film is about *why* the uprising happened, so footage of the actual demonstrations doesn't relate to the film in any way. While images of Tahrir are widely shared, it does not truly represent or explain the reasons behind the revolution. These interviews allow for the archive to create an alternative narration of the revolution and the filmmaking surrounding it. Because it includes other ways, the revolution affected people. Highlighting that there is more to it than what the western narrative shows.

The western narrative highlights certain aspects of the revolution to make it fit into specific standards. One of the reasons it places Tahrir in the centre is because it provides secularity or centrality to the movement and the fact that the word Tahrir directly translates to liberation from Arabic aids in this.¹⁵ The archive targets this narrative by explicitly placing the rest of the world¹⁶ as its target audience. It is a resource for those interested in filmmaking within Egypt, and who want to engage in active research about it¹⁷. The archive also defeats other western standards of revolutions in the media that it focuses on as it does not show a "secular and a mass movement including the bourgeoisie" driven by "internet savvy youth". Instead, it offers a variety of approaches and small uprisings, that were part of a shared identity. It emphasizes the effect and role of the lower social classes and allows for the revolution to be rewritten to these audiences. While it may not fit the status quo of the revolution, it provides a more accurate depiction of the uprisings from the perspectives of those narrating it.

This is affirmed further by the archives' non-linear organizational structure. There is no one method of exploring the archive; the user is granted autonomy in understanding the information presented and can create their own 'pathway' to discovering the archive. Upon entrance, the

¹⁵ Bady, Spectators to revolution, 139.

¹⁶ Lebow *Filming the Revolution*, "About".

¹⁷ Lebow, Seeing Revolution Non-Linearly, 285.

user is met with a blank space filled with coloured dots. Each colour here corresponds to; themes, people, or projects (Fig.1) that can be found within the archive.



Figure 1: *Filmingtherevolution.org*, 2018. Archive level.

Hovering on any of these dots allows for connections to appear and move the user from the archive level of the platform to clusters of information centred around the central theme, person or project (Fig.2).

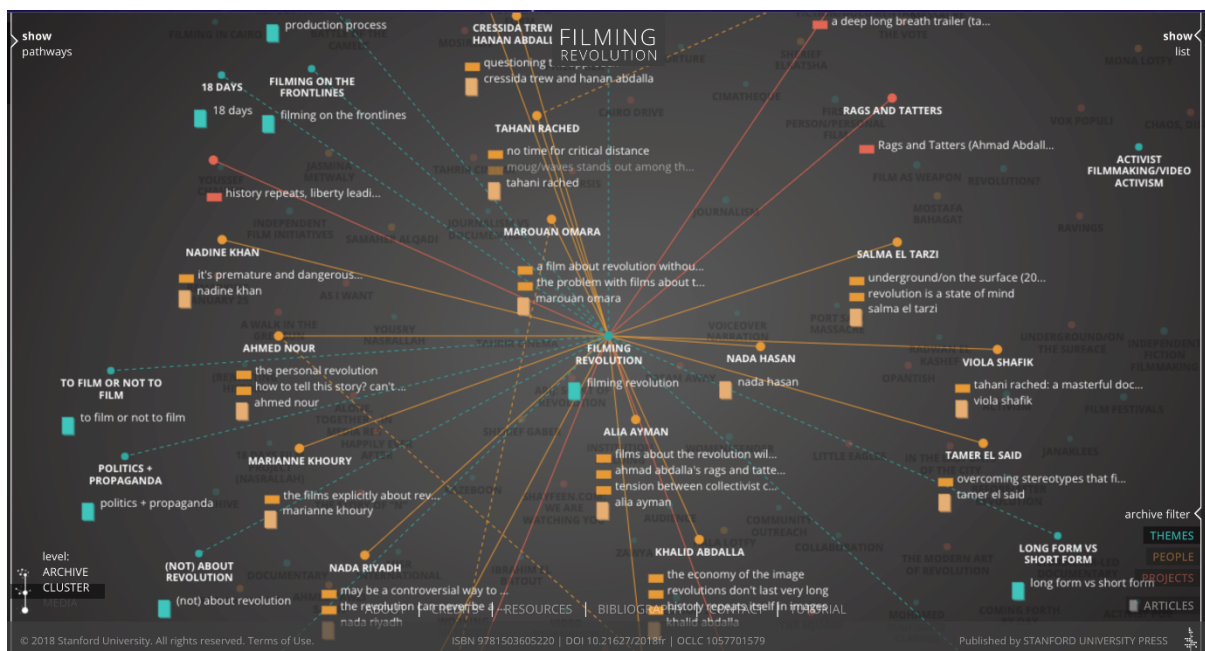


Figure 2, *Filmingtherevolution.org*

This creates a "Crystalline"¹⁸ structure linking the different interview portions within the archive, lacking any chronology. Instead of looking at the people and projects as a hierarchy, it shows them being created independently around the same time and event. Choosing a person in the archive allows the user to see their full interview and its segments, projects, and the themes they speak about. (Fig.3).

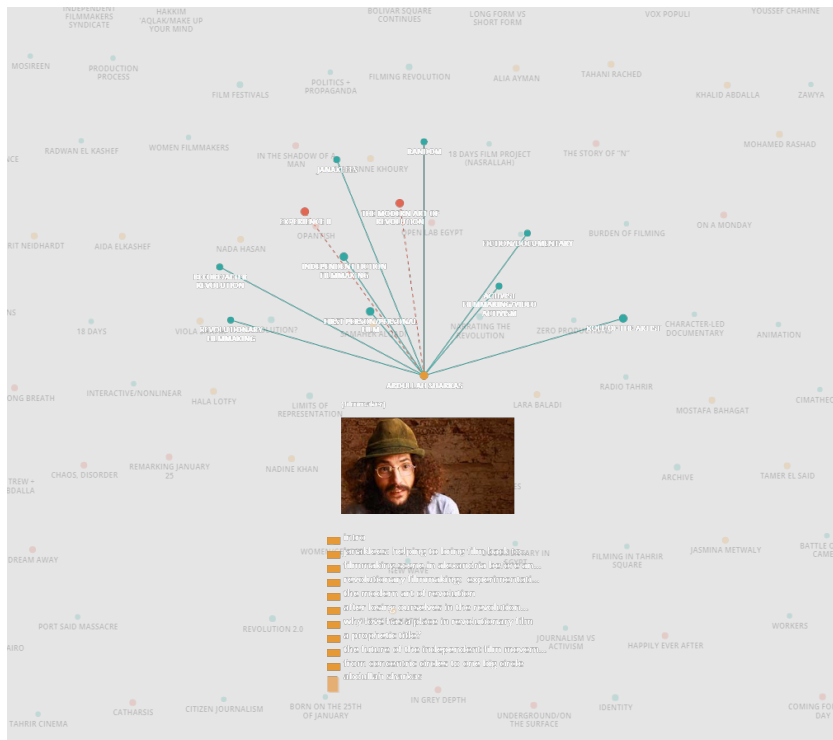


Figure 3. *Filmingtherevolution.org*, 2018. Cluster Level.

This "constellatory"¹⁹ structure brings together people, their thoughts and their work in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. As stated, it has created a virtual conversation between people, many of which didn't know each other but were making art with the same goal of documenting the revolution. For example, when a user chooses the theme 'Filming in Tahrir Square', we see the thoughts of 5 filmmakers who worked on very different projects, tied together through their shared experience of filming in Tahrir or even, choosing not to. From

¹⁸ Lebow, *Seeing Revolution Non-Linearly*, 282.

¹⁹ Lebow, *Seeing Revolution Non-Linearly*, 282.

this, the audience can understand their varied perspectives on what filming the revolution is their eyes. Reshaping the narrative of the revolution once again, as it acknowledges that there is more than one approach, opinion or place that the revolution is based on.

Furthermore, there is no one way of exploring the archive. The lack of chronology means that there is no beginning or end. Instead, the user can create their pathway, which they can then save, and other users can access. This underlines multitude of ways the archive can be explored and prevents hierarchy, as it doesn't place an artist or film above another within the narrative. Once again, reimaging the western narrative of the revolution.

When beginning her research in Cairo, Lebow initially aimed to find a conclusive Egyptian narrative of the revolution²⁰ However, she was unsuccessful in finding one because, as Irit Neidhardt explained, movements that have successfully narrated the movement have been retrospective²¹. According to Lebow, the Egyptian revolution is not over, nor can it be deemed successful there is no comprehensive Egyptian narrative. Filming the Revolution creates a narrative opposing the West by highlighting the revolution's open-ended ness. Through its lack of a linear structure or centrality, the archive mirrors the sporadic nature of the revolution and the numerous ways it can be understood. As well as providing many different perspectives from different types of people across the country.

In conclusion, *Filming the Revolution* relates to the 2011 Egyptian uprising and what followed in how it creates a more inclusive and accurate narrative of the events. It is able to provide a retelling of the affairs without forcing it to fit into western standards. By maintaining a non-linear structure, it highlights the ever-growing nature of the revolution, and considers more

²⁰ Lebow, *Seeing Revolution Non-Linearly*, 279.

²¹ Lebow, *Seeing Revolution Non-Linearly*, 279.

than one perspective of the events. Its focus on independent filmmakers' aids in this because it is able to gain a range of perspectives from different parts of Egypt. Thus creating a holistic narrative of the revolution that is retrospective without denying its continuity.

Word Count: 1873

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Appendix:

All images (Fig.1, Fig.2 & Fig.3) from: *Filming the Revolution*. (2018) Stanford University Press. ISBN 9781503605220 | DOI 10.21627/2018fr | OCLC 1057701579. Accessed: 4 Nov 2022. <https://www.filmingrevolution.org/>