

## All That is Banned is Desired<sup>1</sup>: ‘Rebel Documentaries’ and the Representation of Egyptian Revolutionaries<sup>2</sup>

Ilka Eickhof

Related to the increasing attention to so-called Egyptian revolutionary graffiti, one can also observe the appearance of “Rebel-Documentaries”, focusing on a similar group of protagonists: young, mostly male (graffiti) artists and revolutionaries. In this article, I will take a closer look at a selection of these documentaries and their inherent power structures that frame the representational mechanics with a focus on the western notion of ‘the revolutionary rebel.’ The case examples are: *Abdo-Coming of Age in a Revolution* (Jakob Gross, 2015); *Art War* (Marco Wilms, 2014); *Al Midan-The Square* (Jehane Noujaim, 2013); and *The Noise of Cairo-Art, Cairo and Revolution* (Heiko Lange, 2012). All four focus on the role and the supposedly ‘free, rebellious spirit’ of the young generation in Egypt.

Although taking different perspectives, the films sketch out a snap shot of a generation that is caught in an ongoing violent revolutionary process by (re)presenting a specific rebellious Egyptian identity. In discussing the works, I will look at different intertwined representational effects that are related to the composition, realization and commercialization of the films. Finally, the article raises questions about the self-positionality of the protagonists as well as to the localization of the films, and the existence of embedded power structures and symbolic capital complicit with neoliberal and other pressures.

**Keywords:** Representation; Othering; Revolutionary Art; Symbolic Capital; Egypt

‘Egyptian revolutionary art’ or ‘Egyptian Graffiti art’ has received worldwide attention since 2011. The topic itself has been (critically and uncritically) portrayed, discussed and evaluated in a multitude of articles, books, symposia, talks and exhibitions by researchers, curators, critics, photographers and artists (see for example Abaza, *Tourists and Graffiti*; Antoun; Eickhof; Shalakany). Linked to Egyptian revolutionary or graffiti art is the notion of the revolutionary rebel artist. The focus on young Egyptians and specifically artists also appears in a number of films that have appeared since 2011 and circulated in manifold international film festivals as documentary films, receiving various prizes from within the Western award economy.<sup>3</sup> Now some accounts critically scrutinize the sudden hype on revolutionary youth and their specific, one-dimensional Western representation as young, rebellious, educated, modern, and globalized (El-Mahdi; Bennani-Chraïbi and Filieule, et al.) In the following essay, I will take a closer look at the orchestration of four visual accounts of what I will refer to as rebel documentaries in order to examine how a similar one-dimensional representation of the artistic rebel is constructed, which, in the end, (involuntarily) turns both film directors and protagonists into market products: *Abdo - Coming of*

*Age in a Revolution* (directed by Jakob Gross, 2015), *Art War* (directed by Marco Wilms, 2014), *Al Midan - The Square* (directed by Jehane Noujaim, 2013) and *The Noise of Cairo - Art, Cairo and Revolution* (Heiko Lange, 2012).

### Theoretical Framing: Staging a Rebel Documentary

All four films are set within the genre of 'documentary film.' When we hear 'documentary film,' most of us will think that the film will show an objective reality in the sense of 'how things really are,' or, in other words, that the documentary film is based on the ambition to tell a truth, the idea of the "purity of the image," and with it the "assumptions about transparency, immediacy, and singularity of meaning" (Sabea, Westmoreland 2). This truth, however, is constructed through the regulatory means of image selection, camera operation, musical underlining, narrational intentionalities, titles, etc. Other tools are so-called validating devices like camera jiggles, graininess, bad focus or other 'accidents.' These devices, which we encounter in all four films, serve as an indication that the director did not control the event he or she was recording (Ruby, *Image*) and convey proximity.

The problem is that classical documentary filmmaking is a "system of cinematic rep-

resentation that is said to produce sober, unauthored texts through which the world supposedly tells itself, without any ideological intervention from its author" (Godmilow 3). Although I would assume that the aforementioned filmmakers Gross, Wilms, Noujaim and Lange would not claim that their work is neutral, documentary films do act as authorities to the audiences because their images are assumed to be truth, even though they are fiction (Trinh T. Minh-ha). They "claim the pedigree of the real and all the attributes and privileges of the real" (Godmilow 4). In the end it is the surveillance camera which comes closest to the actual common understanding of a documentary (Plantinga 52).

The way documentary films are built and the way they use reflexive elements lead to questions of authorship and representation—what do we see, who do we see, and how does it talk to us? Although all four films differ regarding their means of production, plot line, funding and circulation experiences, they do have in common that they represent their protagonists as rebel heroes in one way or another – smooth, mature and confident as in *Noise of Cairo*, or young, chaotic and adventurous as in *Abdo*. Why does a German director need to catch the Cairene art scene's

voices to make them be heard again, to "bear witness to Cairo's vibrant artistic underbelly, as it raises its voice once again" (website [noiseofcairo.com](http://noiseofcairo.com))? Why does another German director make a film about Abdo (Abdel Rahman Zin Eldin), who is "a young man looking for his identity" (website [Abdo-film.de](http://Abdo-film.de))? 'Why not?' one might think, yet this is not a sufficient answer since the history of who makes whose voice not only heard, but also matter is strongly connected to positionalities—and to the genre of documentary. This is tied to another intrinsic power dynamic, namely the ability and the freedom of movement: who makes a documentary about whom and for whom, who has the passport to travel (in this case to Egypt), the cash to stay for an extensive period of time and shoot a film (whether self-financed or with funding), and who has the social and educational capital to do so, plus the cash to pay the fixers—and who does not? Where do these documentaries take place?

Film directors Gross, Wilms and Lange financed their works on their own for a long period of time, sometimes facing precarious periods, motivated maybe for the sake of art, of a political project, of believing in something, of receiving attention, and/or of receiving symbolic capital which might translate into funding for

future film projects. However, it is also the protagonists who gain capital. In *Abdo* as well as in *The Square*, working on the film with the person who later appears as the filmmaker was a shared experience for the protagonists, and often a deep friendship evolved out of it, at least for the time of the filmmaking process. "Documentaries are often regarded as elaborate home movies by the people in them. Subjects become

'documentary pop stars' and realize their 15 minutes of fame rather than critically examine how their images are constructed and the potential impact on audiences." (Ruby, *Speaking* 50). Based on personal conversations, some of the protagonists recounted that they were rather disappointed after the films were out and screened, for private reasons and expectations that were not met, but also because

of structural reasons like not being able to travel, or to suddenly recognize how limited the gained social and symbolic capital was for them in the end.

In "A Thing like You and Me," Hito Steyerl refers to David Bowie's song "Heroes" where he calls for a new brand of hero in the neoliberal times of revolution, his hero no longer being a subject, but an object:



The film posters of three of the four documentaries, visually connecting art/street art with the revolution.<sup>4</sup>

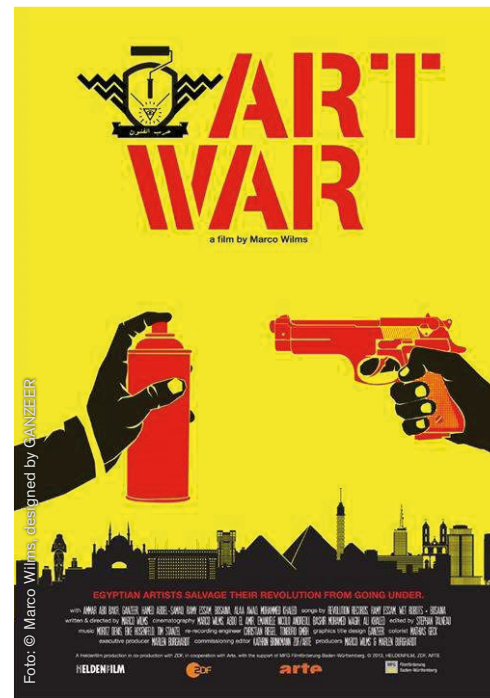


Figure 1: The Noise of Cairo. A Documentary About Cairo, Art and Revolution, 2012.  
Figure 2: Art War. Egyptian Artists Salvage the Revolution from Going Under, 2014.

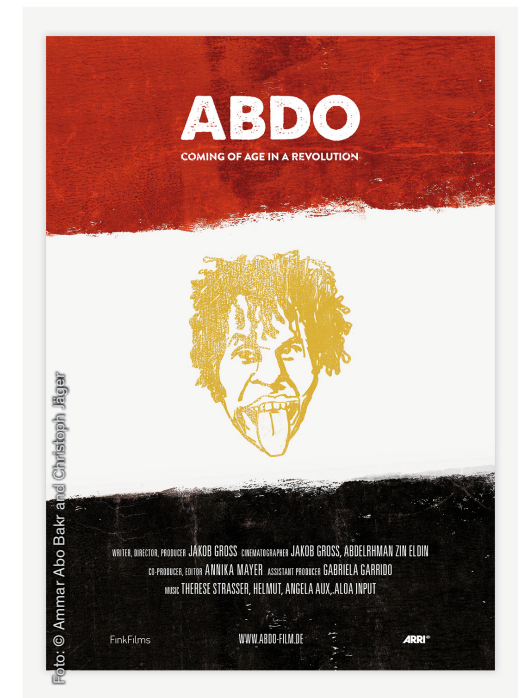


Figure 3: Abdo. Coming of Age in a Revolution, 2015.

“A thing, an image, a splendid fetish,” an image that can be multiplied, copied, looked at as a shiny product (Steyerl 49). This could be a simple critique raised when discussing the Western hype of Cairo’s graffiti in general or the rebel documentaries specifically. But the representation of the rebel in the rebel documentaries is not only objectifying ‘the Other,’ since the protagonists of all films mentioned either filmed themselves or for the most part believed that they genuinely represented themselves. It is the objectification of the subject in between the representation and the represented which is desired on both sides, and in which process agency is being lost—from both the protagonists and the filmmakers. Both cater in one way or the other to a market and become a market product regardless of their personal motivations as film director or protagonist. “I was reminded of the fall of the Wall. I wanted to document an actual revolution, to film people who were the age I had been in 1989,” states Wilms (MacLean). Lange hoped to transport an atmosphere, a “photograph from that time, a snapshot of a moment” (Gad), and Noujaim aimed to “tell the story through the eyes of characters” (npr). “I make films because I’m curious about a story, not because I know the answers,” said Noujaim (Kelsey). The attempt to catch a

unique historic moment, however, is almost impossible. The narratives are contested, memories are aestheticized, and representations are based on intrinsic power structures of who represents whom. Therefore, constructing a narrative that derives out of a moment of sudden hype can be a hazardous undertaking, because it tends to strengthen a singular story only (see Abdallah; Aly; Downey; Harutyunyan). It goes without saying that documentary films present a selective, exiguous point of narration within a contested frame. But why do the rebel documentaries get so much attention in international Western film festivals? Which need does the artist rebel as a product of consumption fulfill, emotionally or financially?

### **Apocalypse Now! A Rebellious Entertainment Industry**

The interview-based documentary *The Noise of Cairo – Art, Cairo, and Revolution* (2012) is the calmest, most static film of the four. It was shot in ten days and without a budget. The atmosphere during the shooting in the summer of 2011 is euphoric and positive. Yet for the audience, it remains unclear how the interviews were structured, who asked the questions, in what language, and what these were. Language and spectatorship in the sense of who is being represented to whom is

crucial in terms of representation. Missing Arabic subtitles in the documentary (Arabic is dubbed to English but not vice versa) suggest an English-speaking audience. The English-only website promotes the documentary as “a cinematic adventure following the interplay between art and revolution,” with artistic expression being considered “nothing but a threat to the status quo.” The film promises us the “flourishing” art scene “as it raises its voice once again”: “The artists of Cairo, who refused to quiet down, come together to be heard.” And so we listen to “[t]welve influencers from Cairo’s cultural scene that lead us on a journey to understand the unique role artists played during the revolution in Cairo” (noiseofcairo.com), though one of the speakers admits that she has not exhibited her work in Cairo since 2004. The twelve narrators vary in age, gender and class, they are given time to speak and to raise and develop their thoughts, and most of them act comfortably on camera. Among the interviewees is a gallery owner from the upper-class neighborhood of Zamalek. Her part is left without musical overtone, followed by an underlying oud melody which later changes to an instrumental *oriental* tune (which reappears). The musical tone shifts to what sounds like simple cello and viola tunes when William Wells (Townhouse Gallery) speaks. The

classic cello/viola/saxophone tune alternates throughout the film with the more traditional Arabic one. We also see Graffiti Artist Keizer represented as the rebel par excellence, hoodie covering most of the face, meeting in the dark at night, blurry lights in the background. His presentation feeds an image of the male rebel, of someone doing something illegal, against a system that shall not know about his existence. Another observation is that some interviewees in *The Noise of Cairo* receive more representational capital as compared to others: for example a man who talks, but is only being referred to as "Osama, Street-Art Project." Both Osama, whose full name is not revealed, and Osama Moneim are not listed as interviewees on the film's website. Although both protagonists appear as speaking to the audience, they are attributed with less significance in regards to representation—a choice of the film director. Shots of city sites and graffiti murals hinting at aspects of urban (imagined Western) modernity and a young, alternative, cool scene interject the narrations, an atmospheric change that is used in all four rebel documentaries. The level of rebel-ness in this specific documentary is subtle; all in all the film seems to be calmly directed, without necessarily chasing the excitement of the revolution—a sharp contrast to the other films.

Yet the images of the graffiti artist at night, the dancing unveiled woman, the young Arabic speaking artist, the middle-age novelist, and the veiled woman on stage cater to a Western imagining of the artistic revolutionary rebel of Cairo, no matter if intended or not by the filmmaker.

The documentary *Art War* (2013) is a different kind of rebel documentary: the music underlining the action-packed visuals is dramatic, regulating the emotional conception. The film marches fleetingly through a chronological order of events announced by staged information boards, such as "June 2011, After the fall of Mubarak the people demand freedom and participation," "January 2012, Graffiti artist paints street fight of Mohamed Mahmoud directly on the wall," "February 2012, Islamists begin propaganda war against revolution," and many more. The documentary ends with "July 2013, The army ousted Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood." The story line is accompanied by explanatory statements from German-Egyptian political scientist Hamed Abdel-Samad, known for his critique of Islam. The main language of the advertisement for all of the films, including *Art War*, is English, not Arabic. This hints at an imagined spectatorship that is not necessarily literate in Arabic, and to a film director who might

not command the language and/or chooses to ignore a certain audience. The use of language counts for the understanding of the context and the social text within which language is embedded. With the translation of Arabic to English subtitles, many nuances for the non-Arabic speaking audience are lost, such as hints in dialect that are indicative of class, the use of certain words, fine humorous nuances, connotations, critique, etc.

Embedded in the timeline of *Art War* is the representation of the characters woven around it, centering on three male artists/graffiti artists with images of them working at night and exposing themselves to danger, in one case urging the filmmaker in direct interpellation to turn off the light on the camera. Next to these images, which support the notion of the rebel as a construct of a young man, are curtailed representations of women as mainly provocative outcasts, perpetuating the focus on their bodies, such as the reduction of the talented artist Bosaina as sexy *agent provocateur* or through Aliaa Elmahdy's naked self-portrait. Also 'the Muslim' in disguise for religious Muslims, aka Brotherhood members, is represented in a pejorative way: for example, Mohamed from the Salafi Al-Nur Party, who has a significant beard, poor com-

mand of English, and voices not very well conceptualized political ideas. This stands in contrast with how the Muslim Brotherhood member Magdy Ashour in *The Square* is portrayed: a complex, intelligent figure who is sometimes doubtful, allows a change of mind, and appears as open and warm-hearted towards his friends. In *Art War*, the religious beliefs of the rebel protagonists are not scrutinized, vocalized, or negatively represented. The areligious rebel in line with Western imaginings is favored over the as obviously religious constructed one.

On the Facebook page of *Art War*, we learn that the documentary shows how “[y]oung Egyptians use graffiti, new music and art to enlighten their fellow citizens and keep the revolutions of the Arab Spring alive against the odds” (Facebook page *Art War*, 21.09.2015). The fact that it is a German film director who chose to represent the artist’s way to ‘enlighten their fellow citizens’ opens up questions of representation and positionality.

The material collected and presented is impressive and often very personal—images of the artists sleeping, in their homes, with their friends, with the director tailing along. Yet the timeline and the emotional regulation through the combination of sound and images blur the quality of the raw material that is accessible,

and the use of regulatory means mirrors the film director’s positionality and his construction of a specific Egyptian young rebel, presented as ‘like us,’ a globalized, secular youth from a similar social field.

*The Square* presents itself as “a revolutionary film about change and the power of people” (thesquarefilm.com). An “[...] Emmy-winning, street-level view of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution [that] captures the astonishing uprising that led to the collapse of two governments,” advertises Netflix, and this one-hour-and-forty-three-minute epos was also nominated for an Oscar. The film follows several people involved in the revolution and tries to capture different positions and political perspectives on the events. Representing voices from various backgrounds in terms of class, gender, religion and age is one of the big assets of this film.

The film starts with Ahmed Hassan, the main protagonist, telling us that he paid his school tuition by selling lemons in the street. From there he guides us through the events, often contemplative, reflecting on what is happening: “Let me tell you how the story began...”.

The image of the protagonists alternates between them being filmed and them speaking directly into the camera. We see them discussing with each other, laugh-

ing, crying, as each one is shortly introduced, then their stories woven together. The timeline that guides us through the events appears more neutral than in *Art War*, and less agitated. The represented events are not only intersected by the English information that appears on the screen, but also by a painting hand (artist Ammar Abou Bakr, whom we also encounter in the films *Art War* and *Abdo*) connecting the revolution with an artistic touch and with the whole complex of the rebel as the artistic activist. The presented images are sometimes extremely graphic: people overrun by cars, mourning, bodies being carried bleeding, wounded and dying. The rebel-ness in this film is subtle again, a smooth repositioning of emotions, igniting empathy with the different characters, be it Ahmed Hassan the narrator and working class rebel, or Magdy Ashour, member of the Muslim Brotherhood, whom we see struggling with trying to find out what is right and what is wrong. The rebel here is represented as a thoughtful person who fights back, theorizes, consults with friends and older members of his family, and is in solidarity well beyond his own borders of belief and ideology. Apart from the protagonists we also hear and see an army spokesperson and a major commenting on the happenings, presenting different opinions and trying to

capture the entangled societal complexities. Due to the course of events that constantly challenged the plot of the film, filmmaker Noujaim and her team tried to mend and adjust the film material, but at some point gave up and let the film be a film, a document of a certain narrative of a certain time. Overall this reflects the diversified approach of the work.

The most recent release of these four rebel documentaries is *Abdo - Coming of Age in a Revolution* (2015). Young Abdo, an “Ultras football fan, atheist and anarchist with a Salafist family background,” is “looking for his identity” with “[h]is camera [being] his only certainty in a world that is upside down” while his “life [...] is shaken by the Egyptian revolts and the football massacre of Port Said,” and he becomes a rebel without a cause (website abdo-film.de/en/). The documentary starts with Abdo looking straight into the camera—it is evening or dawn—as he speaks in Arabic. The English subtitles read “Who are you who are you | you are nobody | you are nobody | nobody | I am also nobody | Don’t laugh... | when it’s not funny | and don’t cry | when it’s not supposed | to make you cry |.” Throughout the film Abdo talks in Arabic or broken English, and sometimes we hear questions addressed to him in English. Abdo walks around, spends time with his friends, drinks beer, plays a

game, talks about girls, university, Gaza, plays football, and takes care of his little dog. The film seems put together out of arbitrary puzzle pieces of someone’s life, with no commentator, narrator or text, and only disrupted by the aforementioned atmospheric change of scenery: all of a sudden barricades, fights, loud noises, people with gunshot wounds stumbling towards the camera, apocalyptic images, demonstrations, violence, people running. At this point it remains unclear if we are looking at Abdo’s material, who is filming as well, or at the director’s.

In one sequence we see Abdo dancing and rotating with the camera tight around his head. Another one is located on the wall, pointing at him, and he looks straight into it, aware of being filmed. He is turning in circles, the music is loud, and then we see the film director Gross sleeping in the adjacent room, Abdo filming him. Similar to *The Square*, both the director’s and the protagonist’s film material is used. The film ends with a close-up of Abdo filming in the metro. He remains silent, thoughtful. The portrait of Abdo as a young man in his ‘rebel years’ during the revolution is carried out in a careful and loving way. The director, one of the youngest of the four presented here, seems to be a friend of Abdo. What makes this documentary interesting for the market? Is it the repre-

sentation of an energetic Egyptian young man who drinks and smokes and frolics with his friends that seems contradictory to our imaginations of a young Arab? Does the film challenge a set stereotype, or exoticize the young revolutionary rebel who acts in the margins and rebels against societal standards?

According to Caroline Francis in “Slashing the Complacent Eye,” film is always ethnography: “[E]thnographic films are inherently always about the filmmaker because film is a medium of construction [...]” (85). The film directors appear visually in *Art War* and *Abdo*, initiating a twist in thought: somehow their appearances remind us of their role, but concurrently they seem to be absent from the film-making and editing process because they themselves appear as an edited, selected image, which confirms the idea of a documentary being something objective, truthful and authentic. At the same time, their appearances construct themselves partly as heroes, as ‘I have been here, too,’ or as taking a bit of rebel aura from figures like Abdo or Ammar.

In the end it is the film director who is cutting and choosing the material and setting it up in a distinct timeline. His or her interpretation and representation is based on a choice of a plot structure, and/or a

choice of a paradigm of explanation, biased by moral or ideological decisions (White 304). Even forms of collaborative filmmaking can be challenged when asking “[w]ho raised and controlled the funds? Who owns the equipment? Who is professionally concerned with the completion of the film? Who organizes and controls the distribution?” (Ruby, *Speaking* 50). In all four cases, this power lies in the hands of the respective director, although the protagonists might have been involved in the process. In the end the films fail when it comes to sharing the symbolic capital that is being accumulated as film director (however it might have been not intended to share this form of capital in the first place). It remains open for debate whether or not this form of symbolic capital is shareable—whether as film director, author, researcher, etc.

### Conclusion: The Way They Are

If you want to know what the undercommons wants [...], what black people, indigenous peoples, queers and poor people want, what we [...] want, it is this – we cannot be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgement generated by the very system that denies a) that anything was ever broken and b) that we deserved to be the broken part; so we refuse to ask for recogni-

tion and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls. (Halberstam 6)

Part of the motivation behind directing these documentaries might have been a sense of solidarity and the wish to support the struggle for the one, truthful narrative of *how things really were*. Yet the underlying message of showing support or solidarity with the revolution or those who were involved through producing a rebel documentary reinscribes an asymmetrical power dynamic. We, the Western middle-class audience who attend film festivals and visit art house cinemas for which these documentaries have been tailored, look at the protagonists in awe, maybe thinking ‘they are just like us.’ Watching a documentary, however, we as an audience tend to forget that documentarians “speak about and never speak for a subject and that films never allow us to see the world through the eyes of [the subject], unless [the subject] is behind the camera” (Ruby, *Speaking* 60). The matter of who represents whom is one that we not only encounter in the directing of the moving image, but also regarding the written word. It is a matter of fieldwork and posi-

tionality, of class, gender, and other intersections that construct subjectivities, and of the question of who gets to speak about whom, and who gets the capital out of speaking about whom.<sup>5</sup>

The young educated male/female artist/revolutionary/rebel is an object of consumption because we ascribe a certain meaning to it: the signification works, telling a story that is widely accepted to manufacture commonality. The interest for ‘the rebellious Other’ was accompanied by a hope for a change from abject representations that were prevalent post 9/11, and indeed these new images of the revolutionary rebel were far from the usual pictures of ‘the Muslim’ (see literature cited in first paragraph). But the non-acknowledgement of epistemological power (who tells the story?) makes it difficult to re-shift the inherent gaze of a privileged audience when the ‘famed subalterns’ of the documentaries persistently remain on a line of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ A contribution that aims at supporting a cause based on serving a hype- and interest-driven attention economy (*Aufmerksamkeitsökonomie*) leaves the signifier of solidarity or support empty. All that is banned is desired, the rebel fighting a cause that we can relate to is celebrated. A deconstruction of social structures and dynamics is needed, espe-



## Ilka Eickhof

(MA in Islamic Studies, Sociology and Modern History) works at the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo as a PhD researcher and lecturer. Her PhD dissertation analyses Northern European cultural institutions in Cairo 2011-2015 (University of Amsterdam). Her research focuses on postcolonial critique, politics of representation, and Bourdieusian theory. Her publications include *Antimuslimischer Rassismus in Deutschland. Theoretische Überlegungen* (2010); "My Friend, the Rebel. Structures and Dynamics of Cultural Foreign Funding in Cairo" (2014), and "Graffiti, Capital and Deciding What's Inappropriate" (2015).

**email:** i.eickhof@nvc.leidenuniv.nl

cially when such structures rely on privileges that prevent and impede the very destruction of them. In that case power remains as part of a normative, unquestioned construction, regulating the image of the rebel we like: a form of Muslim-ness (or any constructed Other-ness) that is in

line with subjectivities that the West imagines as less threatening—and as long as he or she does not rebel against us.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "All that is banned is desired" is also the title of a world conference on artistic freedom of expression, 25.-26.10.2012, held in Oslo, Norway and co-funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> This article would have not been possible without the comments and critique of my reviewers, whom I would like to refer to as silent co-authors. Whoever you are, I am very grateful for the time you invested in this piece, and the patience you must have had when reading it. Your comments and thoughts will guide me in my further work. Thank you!

<sup>3</sup> Alisa Lebow's UK-funded English-only project website 'Filming Revolution' (filmingrevolution.org) gives an interesting yet limited overview of documentary and independent filmmaking in Egypt since the revolution. Not further mentioned in this article because of the difference in approach and genre are the works that the non-profit media collective Mosireen Collective uploaded, or Peter Snowden's carefully composed film *The Uprising* (2013), a film that is entirely based on videos made by citizens and long-term residents of Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen, or the film *The Secret Capital* by Samuli Schielke and Mukhtar Saad Shehata (2013).

<sup>4</sup> The poster of the film *The Square* could not be included as META was unable to obtain permission from the copyright holders. [F.L., editor]

<sup>5</sup> An article discussing Alice Goffman's sociological analysis of the lives of young black men in West Philadelphia quotes her father Erving Goffman: "The most difficult thing about doing fieldwork is remembering who you are." This case is particularly interesting to me because Goffman tries to negotiate her symbolic capital in and with her work: She shares her royalty checks evenly with the book's characters, and they refer to the book as 'our book'.

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