Rap, an Art of the Revolution or a Revolution in Art?

Ever since it has become common to speak of the "Arab Spring", it is easy to see the extent to which certain cultural practices that are particular to youth have turned into an "obligatory figure of speech" in media reports and even among social scientists, as testified in Inverted Worlds: Congress on Cultural Motion in the Arab Region. Having existed in more or less underground networks for years, and occasionally bringing together highly important audiences, young Arab artists' cultural production has become fashionable. Invariably treated as a poor relation in studies on the Arab World, and often analysed solely from the perspective of political Islam, the "culture" that has only just gained international attention had to be official and represented by the big names in literature, film and music. Being subject to the hierarchy of genres, the studies rarely took an interest in "illegitimate"1 practices, starting with those in pop culture. These, however, had experienced an impressive blossoming since the general expansion of cultural production towards the end of the previous century, which was accelerated by the development of new "digital cultures". Among other, certainly more important consequences, the uprisings in the Arab world that we have been witnessing since 2011 have altered this perception to the point where perhaps too much attention is being paid to young rappers and similar protagonists, such as those in alternative music scenes, graffiti artists, and cartoonists in digital networks. Attention not in terms of research, but in terms of interpretation, given that every creative act is regarded as having a mobilising potential, as being a political force in itself, which might seem disproportionate.

In the realm of music, one only needs to consider the case of El General, the young Tunisian composer of Rais el-Bled (The president of the country), a song that was extremely critical of Ben Ali and circulated during his final weeks in power. It accompanied the uprisings in Tunisia before being picked up by the demonstrators in Tahrir Square and elsewhere. Whatever methods there might be to measure its impact, and knowing that despite everything the songwriter has since almost completely disappeared from the international and even the local arena, this piece of music was certainly given more credit than it deserved by making it the "hymn of the revolution", as was done in countless press articles. Which criteria were used, for instance, to include the songwriter in the list of the 100 most influential people of 2011, as Time magazine did a few months later? Incontestably, rap music has

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1 This term is used in the sense it acquired in the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, which has inspired the reflections presented here.
been and continues to be a central element, a shared reference in the culture of the majority of young protesters, who had the courage to take to the streets in December and in January 2011. Nevertheless, it arouses astonishment or even a feeling of discomfort to put the different alternative Arab music genres on a pedestal after having underestimated them for such a long time.

The Voices of the Revolution?

There are several reasons for this discomfort, starting with the fact that the eulogies in honour of the young Tunisian and Arab rappers have the effect, mostly due to ignorance, of passing over in silence everything that today's music forms owe to those of the past. Just as the "Arab Spring" suddenly emerged – if we are to believe the commentaries – out of a political void, which is very convenient for overlooking all the international support that deposed Arab dictators enjoyed in foreign countries, one is led to believe that the songs of the Arab uprisings have no past, that they are not connected with the local music traditions that preceded them. One example of this local tradition is the Moroccan protest song that has been known at least since the 1970s, notably by the group Nass el-Ghiwane.

Displacing from their history the artistic works that have been popularized by crowds of young demonstrators amounts to denying them any link with their heritage. Yet in the case of rap, the musical flow of the young singers of today can literally only be understood in resonance with the way in which the rhythms of the Arabic language, especially in poetry, have always shaped vocal interpretations. Of course, contemporary Arab artistic creation is partly characterized by its capacity to handle a particularly hybrid repertoire, with elements largely borrowed from foreign contexts. Nevertheless, to reduce the entire local "tradition" to irrelevance, and pretend that today's new forms owe nothing to the past, is more than a sign of ignorance; it is the result of an analytical bias, of a (hopefully involuntary) wish to impose an interpretation in the form of a hegemonic narrative.

This cultural bias can be interpreted as a process of "re-colonisation" of contemporary Arab culture by way of a reappropriation that makes it possible to deny any social and political peculiarity on the pretext of praising its "universalism", its "modernity", or even its "post-modernity". Now, at a certain distance from the surprising chain of events that shook the Arab world during the first weeks of 2011, one realizes that at least before the "disappointing", but nevertheless foreseeable victory of political Islam in the elections, the majority of the commentary – particularly outside the Arab world – shared the same enthusiasm in discovering that at the end of the day and contrary to what we thought (and

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had been told for years) the Arab youth resemble "us". At the risk of overdoing it, one could even say that the commentators were relieved to realize that in the end "they" were not so different, and thus not as frightening as one might have thought.

This approach is particularly obvious in three areas of cultural production: in modern music in general and rap in particular; in plastic art, especially urban graffiti; and finally in the text productions that circulated at the time of the demonstrations (slogans and banderoles), and more generally in social networks (giving preference to visual symbols or text productions in languages other than Arabic). In these three domains one can easily find the common trait that, in a context that is principally local, consists in the reuse of an artistic repertoire that clearly has its origins in "the West". Of course, this is not a denial of what the "new Arab cultures" owe to foreign influences, which they are absorbing to a greater extent than before in the context of a globalization that has steadily increased. On the contrary, the "collages", the quotations, the ready-made, the sampling and many other techniques are still part of the artistic vocabulary of a young art production that is both very dynamic and very open to the external world. Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore the "sorting" effect that results from such an insistence on artistic forms in which these effects of hybridization are more manifest than elsewhere, or on productions in which these inlays are, as it were, accentuated, revealing an almost systematic use of borrowings.

If we are to believe in a focus on a specific categories of cultural productions, in this case on those that show an aesthetic preference for contemporary hybridizations, one might assume that the reason for this kind of selection is linked to the desire, no doubt largely involuntary, to recognize on the part of the Other only that which conforms to our own criteria. The reports, which were so quick to take delight in finding that the Arab demonstrations had elements in common with other protesting youth (the "Indignants", Occupy Wall Street, to name but a few), can also partly be considered as an unconscious strategy to ward off a menacing otherness. It is a question of erasing all the rough patches that could expose a veritable political lesson from urban riots, in order to present a smooth and almost folkloric account, that of the "Jasmine Revolution", with a fresh scent announcing a pleasant "Arab Spring". In the French context in particular, one can clearly see how the insistence on the "hybrid modernity" of the symbolic elements associated with the young Arab protesters has, in a way that is completely paradoxical, not brought the latter closer to their "cousins" in the impoverished suburbs of the big cities in France, but has ultimately made them resemble the wholly depoliticized publicity figures that demonstrate a certain affluent way of life in their campaigns for large international companies like Coca Cola or Pepsi-Cola.
The latter were not mistaken, given that the "Arab Spring" very quickly gave rise to a revolutionary branding, the extremes of which can at least be credited with having brought to light the functioning of this particular rhetoric. These disturbing youngsters that live in our suburbs and have the bad taste to protest against their living conditions suddenly become more acceptable, "civilized" so to speak, now that they use smartphones or laptops, now that they imitate what the music industries have learnt to market (just like jazz in the past), in spite of their rebellious origin at the heart of the subcultures in urban peripheries, now that they apply the graphic codes of urban graffiti to the graphic rules of Arabic script. Behind this way of presenting the world (to themselves) lies the possibility – and doubtless in some cases even the wish – to draw a very useful line between the good and the bad, the charming revolutionaries on the one hand, so close to the "Indignants" on Wall Street or elsewhere, and the disturbing bearded men with claims that are as peculiar as they are incomprehensible. A way, as it were, of replacing the white man in the Arab revolutions, of turning the old Lawrence of Arabia into a rejuvenated, post-modern Lawrence of E-rabia!

This phenomenon of distortion or even bias is more prominent in the case of Arab rap than in any other area. Therefore it deserves a more detailed analysis, even within this limited study. In the majority of press articles on the "Arab Spring" – extending to a good number of publications that are more academic in style – the socio-aesthetic analysis of rap as a phenomenon is reduced to a more or less informed variation of a single and unique affirmation: Rap is the voice of the Arab revolution. With very rare exceptions, the musicians who are interviewed and presented to readers to help them discover this type of music exclusively support this interpretation. However, rap did not wait for the events of 2011 in order to develop in the Arab world. On the contrary, since the late 1990s at least, it has constituted a totally independent genre in certain local subcultures, particularly in Morocco, Tunisia and Lebanon. Above all, those who have followed the birth and development of this musical genre know that its protagonists and audience can never be reduced to such a simplistic analysis. Because protest music was born in the urban fringes, the Arab rappers in their entirety are far from the image conveyed by international media, that of young musicians with noble ideas, who put their pieces together on a laptop and promote their music via social networks from their Facebook account – illustrated, of course, with plastic art productions that "modernize" the Arab tradition, using Western

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The reality of the Arab rap scene is socially, politically and ideologically far more complex. Naturally, one can find singers who correspond to the sort of image emanating from the prism of the "Arab Spring". But equally, musicians, including some in the front row, who in their works or public statements are far from defending this ideological current, can also be readily classified as "progressive". One only needs to think of Don Bigg, an "authentic" Moroccan rapper nicknamed al-Khaser (the one who uses coarse language), a star in the Moroccan rap scene since the late 1990s and the composer of a song entitled *Ma bghitsh* (I don't want to), which is extremely critical of the February 20 Movement, the principal platform of the local youth opposition. The truth is that for several years, the Moroccan music scene has been subject to extremely strong internal tensions between currents that adhere to the positions of protesters, particularly the movement called "Nayda", and other leanings that are increasingly integrated into local music production industries (television channels, above all), and are willing to perform for just any "client" and become a political product of a regime that was quick to realize the advantages of associating with a liberal and modern cultural platform.6

The criticism of the oversimplified image of the "good Arab rapper" would not be complete without pointing to a current that is missing in the generally applied analysis grid, and whose ideological position completely contradicts it. Indeed, the musical statements that are popular with the Arab youth of today include what, for lack of a more apt expression, could be termed "Islamic rap",7 i.e. an artistic creation in line with the socio-political and aesthetic criteria of this type of art work, but that clearly positions itself ideologically alongside players who claim to represent an anti-establishment Islam. Showing a strong presence in the social and above all the underground media, if only to elude the repression that this kind of political expression is subjected to in many countries in the region, it so happens that the circumstances enable "Islamic rap" to become more and more visible. In Tunisia, for example, the rise to power of a government dominated by the Ennahda party, and more generally the restructuring of the political field according to new balances of power, have given this phenomenon a greater public presence. At the time of the last election campaign one could see a local rapper, Psycho M, not only providing the background music for electoral meetings of the Islamist party that was to win the elections, but taking advantage of this platform to call for the physical liquidation of a film-maker, Nouri Bouzid, known for his fight on behalf of what the local political players term

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7 For a few examples of this type of production see "Rap et revolution", a series of articles published in January 2012 in the blog "Culture et politique arabes". [http://cpa.hyptheses.org](http://cpa.hyptheses.org).
"secularism". It is evident that this young rapper, who does not hesitate to perform at political meetings of the Ennahda party with *Allahu akbar* in the background, does not risk joining his compatriot El General in the annual top lists of big international magazines.

**A Revolution in Art Despite Everything?**

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The genuine links between rap and young people are thus more complex than suggested by the rather simple accounts praising the "voices of the revolution". To examine this complexity, however, is not tantamount to denying this musical genre the capacity to cause division. On the contrary, with regard to the cultural history of the Arab world in the modern era, one could support the view that – together with other artistic expressions that are frequently associated with it, such as street graffiti – it paves the way for a "small cultural revolution" that has so far not found a visible political manifestation, but which fits in well with the uprisings that shake the region. In the first place, and even though one might question the simplifications that this approach involves, rap continues to be a form of protest. This, however, is not to be assessed at the discursive level of song lyrics, public statements by singers, glosses on websites and other means of distribution, the analysis of which risks being misleading if it is limited to this single "superficial" approach and does not take into account the objective conditions in which these discourses are produced. Especially in the field of cultural economy, it is obvious that rap and similar creative activities bring to the fore the practices for circumventing official distribution networks and the attempts to bypass diverse links in the institutional chain for the spreading of culture. Arab rap, produced at the fringes of urban societies, was born and developed by successfully creating a universe of hip-hop culture, disconnected from the authorities that grant political and financial acknowledgement. Of course, we witness reprocessing and cooptation attempts on both levels, and it is inevitable that at least some of the players in these new fields of artistic creation will abandon the fragile networks of self-production for more lucrative contracts with the local representatives of mass production cultural industries. Nevertheless, whatever its destiny and its capacity to retain its resistance potential over time, the rap movement, by winning over the entire region (including, even if only marginally, the Gulf states), has set an example for the success of an art production totally outside the norm because of its dynamics of production.

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In other respects, this is the second point that deserves comment in a re-examination of the "revolutionary" characteristics of this kind of cultural production. The alternative practices in fields such

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8 Mostly taken over without verification, this notion would deserve closer examination. Also, Psycho M's attacks, which are of course blameworthy, nonetheless need to be analysed in the particular context of rap "culture" and its verbal excesses.
as music, literature and graphics not only develop at the fringes of institutional networks for artistic production; they do so largely outside normal legitimation processes. This breaking away from common channels of cultural reproduction is not to be confused with the well-known strategy of the avant-garde, whose criticism of the prevailing criteria for cultural legitimacy is, as it were, the prerequisite for occupying the central positions at the heart of the cultural arena, if only by way of a generational turnover. Without doubt, this phenomenon can partly be found in the practices of the Arab youth, as mentioned in connection with some singers in the Moroccan rap scene, several of whom ended up in established cultural networks. Equally, a number of protest street-art works have already made their way into exhibition rooms and even international art markets, while literary production has taken over some of the stylistic traits hitherto restricted to the Internet. However, despite the existence of this generational renewal that allows the "institution" to function by integrating successive avant-gardes, it seems in many cases that the most interesting cultural practices in the context of the Arab uprisings – at least from a sociological point of view – are to be found outside the "normal" cultural field. In the same way that the rappers have sometimes succeeded in finding new ways of financing themselves (self-production and distribution channels, militant and/or neighbourhood networks), it is striking to note that they rarely if ever owe the success and fame of their professional trajectories to any validation by the cultural "elites". On the contrary, these seem to have lost a considerable part of their role as "guardians of good practice" in a development that is very unusual for the region.

The overarching position of the "enlightened elites at the service of the ignorant masses", institutionalized since the Arab Nahda, is thus subject to a criticism so radical as to reveal a lack of even the slightest consideration on the part of the young Arab underground artists for this role of gatekeeper, which largely stands for the symbolic power of institutional mediators. With respect to the cultural history of the modern Arab world, the practices that young people elaborate through their own networks reveal a deep breach, not only with the emancipatory paradigm in place since the Nahda of the nineteenth century i.e. the successive art canons prescribed by the elites (national, committed, today "motivated", hādīf, in the religious sense of the word), but equally with the economic model, exploited since the last quarter of the century by cultural industries for mass production that gives preference to the circulation of a local version of international pop culture (notably through industries of audiovisual production). If the undeniable explosion of creativity accompanying the Arab uprisings provides a glimpse into a "revolution", this revolution would in a way represent the prelude to a new phase in the cultural history of the modern Arab world, a phase that might enable new players to

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9 Dabke on the Moon (2012), the latest CD of the music group Dam, who are easily the most visible group on the Palestinian scene, is self-produced and distributed via the Internet in accordance with a policy adopted by these artists for circumventing the biggest players of the music industry, on the local as well as on the international level.
elaborate artistic propositions to new audiences, bypassing the mediation of "learned elites". Even two years after the beginning of the events, however, it is still very difficult to imagine the future awaiting these new forms. Nor is this necessarily the moment for optimism, because the political developments in general are moving towards reason in the name of "a return of/to conscience".\footnote{This formulation intentionally evokes the title of a famous work by the Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim that celebrates the "return to reason/conscience" (‘awdat al-wa‘i') of Sadatism after the "folly" of Nasserism.} This is a process that is equally supported by the capacity of the industrial players of the culture market – also not to be underestimated – to make a profit from all forms of culture, including those that are most radically anti-establishment.

This leads us directly to a final, even more hypothetical remark on the "revolutionary" nature of the cultural practices brought to light by the uprisings of the "Arab Spring". This time it concerns the incontestable links between the symbolic production of Arab artists and the responding "production" of an Arab identity (including its political dimensions). Returning once again to the early times of the Nahda, one notes that its approaches to the Arab identity (or even "Arabness", urûba) have been governed, irrespective of the periods and the experiences in question, by the same model, that is, the attempt to vertically impose ("from above") models that were in effect "chosen" by a political, cultural, economic and sometimes even religious elite. The ultimate representation of an ideal to be reached – that of an Arab nation united on the path to progress – has functioned as a télos. Henceforth, Arab cultural production has found not only its legitimacy, but equally the dynamics that nourished its development (building the modern nation). Even though it is much too early to go beyond mentioning a mere tendency, in this very provisional conclusion I venture to emphasize that the new cultural forms in these "Arab Springs" are essentially developing according to a totally different logic. Quite clearly, the rappers of the Arab world, the graffiti artists who express themselves on city walls, and tomorrow's authors who post their texts in social networks, produce art forms that no longer fit in with this "Arabness", whether it is viewed as justification or as the objective of creative work. Their approach is different, because they do not set out from this postulate and do not hesitate to introduce into their artistic language all kinds of exogenous references. And it has become less and less common to ask the obligatory question regarding the authenticity that was so important for previous generations.

However, it is perhaps when they no longer endeavour to produce a specifically Arab art with their creative language that their works most intensely express the questions visibly entrenched in the local and regional problems. In the new artistic practices of the Arab youth, "Arabness" is no longer a goal, nor even a creative horizon; it is an "identity" – even though the term is inappropriate – that looms up
from the Arab world's "art in conversation" precisely at the time of digital globalization.¹¹

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¹¹ “Art in conversation” refers to Dominique Cardon’s suggestion of a "society in conversation" thanks to the developments of Web 2.0 (Dominique Cardon: La démocratie internet: promesses et limites, Paris / Seuil 2010).