“Creative Insurrection: The Body in the Arab Uprisings”

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The Arab uprisings enable a renewed understanding of how revolutionary creative dissent combines political activism and artistic innovation on a transnational scale. Many analyses of the uprisings have emphasized digital technology, neglecting creative tactics that create insurrectionary popular culture, promote new social solidarities, and shape revolutionary political identities. Drawn from larger project, this paper argues that the human body is the indispensable medium of creative insurrection, a linchpin of media, culture and revolutionary change in Arab countries. Based on a wealth of textual, visual and audio-visual primary Arabic-language data, and informed by the literature on the American and French Revolutions, I explore how “embodied” creative activists, in life-threatening situations, create rebellious media, attract attention, and open alternative political imaginaries. Through close readings of selected insurrectionary graffiti, body acts, puppet shows, and videos, I explain how acutely precarious conditions of cultural production shape the politics, aesthetics and transnational modes of address of revolutionary media, offering glimpses of nascent struggles and identities. Using and critiquing a wide array of theory about the body and embodiment (Bakhtin, Butler, De Baecque, Foucault, Elias, Hunt, Mauss), the paper explains the ways in which the human body is the nexus of political subjectivity and systemic power: as tool, intermediary, metaphor, and prism, the human body is the medium through which struggles for power, identity and legitimacy are physically fought, discursively constructed and ideologically refracted.