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The Voice of Freedom: Remarks on the Language of Songs from the Egyptian Revolution 2011

Introduction

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As in many revolutions, music and songs played a crucial role in the events that took place on Tahrir Square during the so-called 25 January Revolution. Alongside slogans that were shouted or presented on banners, cartons, buttons and the like, songs constituted an integral part of what happened on the Square during the 18 days of the uprising. The underlying messages of their lyrics, which were often spontaneous, are authentic testimonies of the revolutionary aura of these days. They offer many insights into the dreams and hopes of the people who gathered there. Thanks to modern communications technology, many of these spontaneous "artistic products" of the revolution have been preserved, as there are still numerous videos available on the Internet.¹

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In addition to the songs performed on the actual "stage" of the revolution, many others are also direct products of the events in Cairo and other cities. Although many songwriters may not have had first-hand contact with the Tahrir Square activists, their songs reflect the unique atmosphere of those days. Even if they were not physically present "on stage", their aim was to encourage the activists by their individual contributions to the revolution.² A fascinating feature of the Egyptian Revolution, beyond its political impact, is that it inspired the creation of an enormous mass of rather heterogeneous artistic products. They belong almost exclusively to what is often labelled "popular culture", that is, graffiti, street art and music. For the latter, it was the Internet – and YouTube in particular – that provided the infrastructure enabling Egyptian revolutionary songs to emerge in less than three weeks. Mark LeVine states that "the spread of the Internet has created new forms of indigeneity and hybridity that have proven crucial for the development of revolutionary activism in the region."³

¹ Research on this material can best be evaluated by someone who was present on the scene.

² Some of the most popular revolutionary poems were written by poets who were not even in Egypt. See Lewis Sanders IV / Mark Visonà: The Soul of Tahrir: Poetics of a Revolution, in: Samia Mehrez (Ed.): Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir, Cairo / New York 2012, 213-248, here: 213.

³ Mark LeVine: Music and the Aura of Revolution, in: International Journal of Middle East Studies 44 (2012), 794-797, here: 795.

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The term "popular culture" should not be understood in the sense of "culture which is widely favoured or well-liked by many people."⁴ It is neither a synonym for mass culture nor does it suggest that it originates from "the people". Instead, I use the recent definition of Holt Parker, who perceives popular culture as twofold: (1) "the unauthorized utterance, the voice of the subaltern, of those without access to cultural capital", and (2) "the authorized utterance in search of as large an audience as possible."⁵ For songs, both definitions often hold true. The songs were not accepted by the political establishment (nor always by the artistic), but were authorized by millions of citizens backing the revolution and trying to spread its messages. However, there were other revolutionary songs that the activists did not sanction, since they were performed by singers with doubtful revolutionary credentials. In my opinion, these songs are also part of the musical tapestry of the revolution. Even if active revolutionaries deny that some of them are authentic, seen from a broader perspective their themes and arrangements largely correspond to those of the "real revolutionary songs". Neglecting them would therefore mean ignoring the feelings and motifs of those tens and hundreds of thousands of Egyptians who have listened to them.

Objectives of this analysis

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The approach of this article is mainly philological. I am interested in how language was used to describe – and partially even to create – a certain atmosphere in Egypt during the days of the revolution. The focus is therefore on the songs' lyrics, which I will analyse from different angles. Given the vast number of songs dedicated to the revolution, I can only highlight main themes and stylistic devices, and hopefully encourage future in-depth studies on this fascinating subject.⁶ I will mention brief biographies and previous works of the artists in question where necessary, but I will not deal with video clips. Their images and arrangements certainly deserve analysis, but are beyond the scope of this study.

⁴ Holt N. Parker: Toward a Definition of Popular Culture, in: *History and Theory* 50 (May 2011), 147-170, here: 150. For the problem of how defining popular culture, see also Hans-Otto Hügel (Ed.): *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien, Diskussionen*, Stuttgart / Weimar 2003.

⁵ Parker: Definition of Popular Culture (see FN 4), 169-170.

⁶ See Sanders / Visonà: *The Soul of Tahrir* (see FN 2), 217.

Songs selected

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I have chosen 33 songs, the majority of which were uploaded on YouTube during or immediately after the revolution in January and February 2011. While there is a vast choice available, I believe my selection provides a relatively comprehensive picture of the songs of the Egyptian Revolution. Since this article is based on a wide cultural approach, to be pure or authentic was not a selection criterion. The songs analysed are of very heterogeneous, sometimes even contradictory origin. My corpus is characterized by a juxtaposition of songs that on the one hand were sung by people on Tahrir Square putting their lives at risk, and on the other hand by hypocrites such as Tāmīr Ḥusnī, who tried to jump on the revolutionary bandwagon at the last minute.

Popularity and genres

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Among the selected songs, I include both very popular and well-known ones, and lesser-known songs that I found on the Internet. For research purposes, the low popularity of a song does not affect its relevance, as it could nevertheless be considered a product of the revolution if it was composed in an attempt to encourage supporters of the uprising. To find out how well known a given song really was remains a crucial question. I relied on the number of hits found on YouTube, and although I am aware of the weakness of this approach, I chose it for lack of an alternative. Thus the popularity of the selected songs must be treated with caution.⁷

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The revolutionary songs described here belong to very different genres: mainstream pop music, *šā' bī* music, folk-songs, chanson-like songs, rap and hip-hop. Highly popular are some songs of the mainstream pop category, showing more than 1 million views, among them [Sōt il-hurriyya](#)⁸ by Hānī 'Ādil and Amīr 'Īd, [Bahibbik ya blād](#)⁹ by Rāmi Gamāl and 'Azīz aš-Šāfi'i, or [Izzāy](#)¹⁰ by Muḥammad Munīr. Many of the hip-hop songs have attracted much less attention but there are also some very

⁷ I would like to thank my colleague Lea Müller-Funk, to whom I owe some very interesting information. When carrying out fieldwork in Cairo in August and September 2012, she was so kind as to show my list of songs to more than a dozen young people. The results were unexpected: almost 50 per cent of the songs were unknown to them, and many were known only to one or two persons. Among them are pieces such as *ya Maydān* by CairoKee or Donjewans *Ḍidd il-ḥukūma*, which have more than 1 million views on Youtube. I cannot offer a convincing explanation for this discrepancy. Perhaps only those who are actively interested in politics and the revolution listen to this kind of music.

⁸ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgw_zfLLvh8 <15.5.2013>.

⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btXZMh5tHDA> <15.5.2013>.

¹⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9TOi3EwRQw> <15.5.2013>.

popular songs, for instance, Rāmi Donjewan's [Didd il-hukūma](#),¹¹ with more than 1.5 million views. In both Western and Arabic sources many of these well-known songs are labelled as "Anthems of the Egyptian Revolution". Thus a kind of semi-official aura is bestowed on them.¹²

Formal characteristics

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The style of the songs is functional, rather than poetic in a stricter sense.

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All the songs I have found are in the local Egyptian dialect, which is true for Tunisian and Syrian revolutionary songs as well.¹³ In this regard, the songs of 2011 differ from several of the patriotic songs that followed the Egyptian revolution of 1952 and were sung in Standard Arabic (such as 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ' *al-'Ahd al-ḡadīd* and Umm Kulṭūm's *Anā š-ša'b*).

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The songs of the Egyptian revolution as found on the Internet were not products of an anonymous mass of people. They were composed by more or less known artists whose aim was to support the uprising against the *ancien régime*. Although some songs were written before the revolution,¹⁴ most were certainly products of what we can call spontaneous art, as they were often composed within a very short time.¹⁵ The almost complete absence of female artists is remarkable.¹⁶

Frequently addressed themes

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The following lines will show that the concepts most frequently found in the songs coincide largely with those prominent in slogans and graffiti. Besides *Maṣr* (Egypt), the most frequent positive terms are *ḥurriyya* (freedom) and *ḥa'* (with its plural *ḥu'ū'*), (truth(s), right(s)). Together with the phrase *'adāla*

¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7n44IHSB3w> <15.5.2013>.

¹² The Arabic phrase "نشيد الثورة المصرية" gets 85.400 results in Google <30.11.2012>.

¹³ The most famous pan-Arab revolution slogan, however, is in Standard Arabic: الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام.

¹⁴ See for instance the song *Izzāy* by Muḥammad Munīr.

¹⁵ The same is said to be true for the world's most famous revolutionary song: The Marseillaise was allegedly written by Joseph Rouget de Lisle in a single night in 1792; Laura Mason: *Singing the French Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics, 1787–1799*, Ithaca / London 1996, 94.

¹⁶ One exception is 'Ā'ida al-Ayyūbi, who featured in the song *ya l-Maydān* by CairoKee. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eE3yaJcOp28&feature=fvwrel> <1.12.2012>.

igtima'iyya (social justice), these concepts are prominent in the song [Tahya Maṣr](#)¹⁷ (Long live Egypt) by the Berlin-backed band Scarabeuz: *miš 'ayzīn ġēr ḥa' ina l-insāni – taḥya Maṣr! 'adāla 'igtima' iyya w- 'ēš ... taḥya Maṣr wi-taḥya il-ḥurriyya* (Our human right is all we want / Long live Egypt! / Social justice and bread to eat ... / Long live Egypt, and long live freedom!).

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Lines containing the words *karāma* (dignity) and *šahāma* (honour) are also very numerous, for example *Maṣr-i 'ālīt il-karāma 'izzit in-nafs-i bi-šahāma* (Egypt said: Dignity means self-respect in honour) ('Amr Diyāb). A term that, at least in my collection, does not appear a single time is "Islam". Even the use of the word "Muslim" is restricted to certain contexts that are discussed below.

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For negative words, it is again significant that certain concepts do *not* occur in the texts of the songs investigated: Among these are the word "enemy" itself and the names of "common enemies" such as Israel, America, Freemasons and the like.¹⁸ Palestine is an issue only in the song [is-Saġīn](#)¹⁹ by the band Arabian Knightz, most likely because one of the singers, Šāḡiya Maṣūr, is Palestinian.²⁰ Negative terms are frequently preceded by the word *kifāya* (Enough!), which was also the name of an Egyptian protest movement that started in 2004.

Bright future - dark past: The function of antagonisms

<14>

A very fruitful field for analysing the songs is the way in which the contrast between the past and the future is put into words. Such opposing images are also found in revolutionary poems written in a more elevated style.²¹ The lyrics of the songs mirror the hopes of Egyptians that many negative elements that had prevailed under the old regime will change for the better. This idea is frequently expressed in one line or in two or more consecutive lines, as in the song [Raġ' in](#)²² by the group Iskindirella: *raġ' in bi-'alb gidīd, raġ' in amal biyazīd, xaṭar yirūḥ li-amān... raġ' in, raġ' in min il-māḍi,*

¹⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nd-QZZOW4> <15.5.2013>.

¹⁸ Some of the popular *ša'bi* singers overtly express anti-Israeli and anti-Western sentiments in their songs. Compare Nicolas Puig: Egypt's pop-music clashes and the "world-crossing" destinies of Muhammad 'Ali Street musicians, in: Diane Singerman / Paul Amar: Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East, Cairo / New York 2006, 513-536, here: 530.

¹⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=schldC3LdLk> <15.5.2013>.

²⁰ For this song, compare also the article [انطلاق موسيقى البوب والثورة الشعبية](#) at: <https://www.goethe.de/ins/eg/kai/kul/mag/mus/ar8626480.htm> <2.12.2012>.

²¹ Compare Sanders / Visonà: The Soul of Tahrir (see FN 2), 229.

²² http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJux_wEqCMs <15.5.2013>.

rayḥīn ‘ala l-mustaqbal (We return with new hearts / We return and hope increases / Danger gives way to security ... / We return from the past / And progress to the future). Another antagonism is that of "inside" and "outside". Some lines in the songs describe life under the old regime as being dominated by social isolation and by the desire to avoid public spaces. In a way, this reminds us of the so-called Biedermeier period that preceded the Revolution of 1848 in Central Europe. For decades, restrictive policies led most people to concentrate on the domestic sphere. A similar picture is drawn by CairoKee in [Saktin saktin](#)²³: *mašyīn fi ḥalna gamb il-ḥēt, ahamm-i ḥāga nrūḥ il-bēt* (We used to go alone / along the wall [i.e. avoiding the open street] / The most important thing was to get home), or in the song [Waqṭ is-sawraqiyya](#)²⁴ by the all-star rap group Revolution Records: *‘ašān kida ‘amilna sawra ḥurra kunna guwwa ṭli’na baṛṛa* (Therefore we made a free revolution / we were inside [but now] we stepped out).

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The word *ḥilm* (dream) and even more frequently its plural, *aḥlām*, plays a prominent role in the songs. It is the dream of a better future, a life of freedom and justice. A good example is found in the song [Ahlām](#)²⁵ by Aḥmad Makkī:²⁶ *isma‘ minni amsāl w-kalām, isma‘ minni ‘an il-aḥlām ba’d-i-ma tisma‘ ‘awzak taḥlam, taḥlam ṣāḥi w-lamma tnām* (Hear from me about proverbs and sayings / hear from me about the dreams! / After you have heard it you will want to dream / to dream while you are awake and asleep).²⁷ Not surprisingly, the dreams of the future are contrasted with the nightmares of the past. The rapper Muḥammad Usāma addresses Mubarak personally in a song from May 2011: *ana miš āsif ya rayyis ya-lli ṭāridni min baladi – dammart-i kull aḥlāmi w-ma-kunt-i-š ḍahri wi-sanadi – ana b-ḥamd rabbi sabni a’iš li-ḥadd-i-ma šūfak maḥbūs – miš ‘ašān ašmat fik lākin li-agl afū min il-kabūs* (I am not sorry, Mr President / You, who expelled me from my country / Who destroyed all my dreams and who was no support for me / Thanks to the Lord that He let me live until I can see you imprisoned / Not because I indulge in malicious joy at your expense / only because I woke up from a nightmare).

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The future is bright and full of dreams, whereas the past is described as dominated by remaining silent, and characterized by inactivity, resignation and stagnation. Silence in particular frequently appears in the songs, for example in one by [Rāmi Donjevan](#):²⁸ *kifāya nōm, kifāya mōt kifāya skūt, law ‘andak damm bi-gadd ihtif wi-bi-a’la ṣūt* (Enough of sleeping, enough of dying, enough of remaining

²³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yevf20M0OP4&feature=relmfu> <15.5.2013>.

²⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52Xr9OS7o48> <15.5.2013>.

²⁵ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vc8pqw_NAY <15.5.2013>.

²⁶ He is primarily known as an actor and director, see Sanders / Visonà: The Soul of Tahrir (see FN 2), 234.

²⁷ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vc8pqw_NAY <4.4.2013>.

²⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7n44IHSB3w&feature=related> <15.5.2013>.

silent! / If you have courage, then shout out at the top of your voice!).

The tyrant and his regime

<17>

Songs that were sung "on stage", meaning on Tahrir Square, bluntly criticized the president, mentioned his name and told him to leave (e.g. Rāmī 'Iṣām's *Iḥḥa*). However, the majority of songs rarely mentioned the opponent by name – in parallel with the songs of other revolutions.²⁹ Instead, we often find *ḥukūma* (government), *niḏām* (regime), *ẓulm* (injustice, tyranny), and of course *ẓālim* (tyrant). Frequently the opponent is denoted in the third person plural, "they".³⁰ A good example is *dammak misayyaḥīnu – 'atlak miḥallilīnu – waṭanak mibahdilīnu – dīnak mistahdifīnu – ṣōtak humma katmīnu – ḥa' ak kamān aklīnu – w-axūk lissa 'atlīnu* (Your blood, they are spilling it / Your death, they are sanctioning it / Your homeland, they are throwing it into chaos / Your religion, they are targeting it / Your voice, they are silencing it / Your right, they are taking it [literally: eating it] / Your brother, they are still killing him).³¹

<18>

Even in those lines where open criticism is expressed, it is relatively modest, given the protestors' hatred for the regime. One example is Muḥammad Usāma's lines, already cited, in which he expresses that he is happy to see Mubarak in jail – and not "hanging" as one might expect.³² The opponent is unjust, oppressive, takes the dreams of the people, cooperates with the country's enemies, but no songs are as harsh as many of those sung during the French Revolution or the Revolution of 1848.³³

²⁹ For example in the songs of the 1848 Revolution. Compare Heidrun Kämper-Jensen: *Lieder von 1848: Politische Sprache einer literarischen Gattung*, Tübingen 1989.

³⁰ In a poem by Sayyid Ḥiḡāb, Mubarak is addressed as *ya ismak ēh* "Hey What's-Your-Name?", Sanders / Visonà: *The Soul of Tahrir* (see FN 2), 238.

³¹ Rāmi Donjowan: *Ḍidd il-ḥukūma*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uwai6oTAcMM> <27.5.2013>

³² This does not mean that many people did not wish him to be hanged, as was shown by the numerous Mubarak puppets hanged symbolically on lamps in Tahrir Square during the revolution.

³³ Compare Mason: *Singing the French Revolution* (see FN 15), 134 (text of *Réveil du peuple*); Kämper-Jensen: *Lieder von 1848* (see FN 29), 46.

The peaceful revolutionary

<19>

With the exception of a few rap songs,³⁴ the lyrics of Egyptian revolutionary songs create an atmosphere of solidarity, mutual understanding, and non-violence. A typical example is the following segment from the famous song *Sōt il-hurriyya*³⁵: *silahna kān aḥlamna, wi-bukra wāḍiḥ 'uddamna* (Our dreams were our weapons³⁶ / and tomorrow is clear before us).³⁷ The strict policy of non-violence, which was a key element of the revolutionaries' success, is reflected in the songs, as they rarely attack a subject directly. Much more often we find lines that construct the image of peaceful happenings, where people laugh even though they are in danger. "In fact, singers and rappers were actually smiling as they performed their music. And so were the crowds surrounding them."³⁸ This typical line is from CairoKee's *ya l-Maydān: nitgamma' nišrab iš-šāy, il-ḥa'* 'arifna bingibu izzāy (We come together to drink tea / And we know how to get our rights).³⁹

The innocent martyr

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The peacefulness of the demonstrators contrasts harshly with the brutality of the regime. Thus the revolution took its toll, as expressed in the line, *wi-niktib tarixna b-dammīna* (And we write our history with blood).⁴⁰ The *šuhadā'*, the martyrs of the revolution, are a popular theme in many songs, particularly in those composed immediately after the successful end of the uprising. Typical are lines like *nās barī'a kān hadafha baladha titḡayyar šuwayya* (They were innocent people who just wanted to change their country a little bit).⁴¹ One can say that the martyr-songs constitute their own sub-genre among the revolutionary songs, characterised by romanticizing, even kitschy texts sung to videos displaying portraits of the deceased heroes. Many martyr songs were composed by stars of the

³⁴ For instance, the songs *Waqt is-sawragiyya* (see FN 24) and *is-Sagīn* (see FN 19).

³⁵ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgw_zfLLvh8 <15.5.2013>.

³⁶ The line "Our dreams were our weapons" is so programmatic that it was used as the subtitle of a CD called Soundtracks of the Revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt: "Our dreams are our weapons"; published 2011 by World Network (no. 495135).

³⁷ By Hāni 'Ādil and Amīr 'Īd: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgw_zfLLvh8 <27.5.2013>.

³⁸ Mark LeVine: The New Hybridities of Arab Musical Intifadas. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3008/the-new-hybridities-of-arab-musical-intifadas> <4.12.2012>.

³⁹ See FN 16.

⁴⁰ Hāni 'Ādil and Amīr 'Īd (see FN 37).

⁴¹ From the song *Dayma 'ayšīn* by Muḥammad Ḥamāqi, one of the earlier martyr songs, uploaded 13.2.2011. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ag_kpGqRwY.

Egyptian pop scene such as ‘Amr Diyāb, whose song [Masr-i ’āli](#)⁴² is among the most popular.⁴³ The idea that the martyrs did not die in vain is very common. Their death guarantees a better future for the majority who are still alive.

Solidarity and patriotism

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Certainly one of the most popular themes is that of unity and solidarity, often expressed by the phrase *īd waḥda*, for example in the first line of the song that raised Rāmi ‘Iṣām to fame: [kullina īd waḥda](#)⁴⁴ *ṭalabna ḥāga waḥda irḥal irḥal irḥal* (We all, hand in hand, call for just one thing / Get out, get out, get out!). As mentioned, the opponent is often addressed in the third person plural. This "impersonal plural" is set in contrast to the first person plural, thus emphasizing solidarity and creating a sense of unity. Terms repeatedly found are: *šababna* (our young people), *ḥa’ina* (our right), *baladna / biladna* (our country). The latter and *Maṣr* (Egypt) are the most frequent words occurring in the songs, regardless of their genre. Both are also personalized, as in *ya blādi, ya blādi ana baḥibbik ya blādi* (O my country, O my country / I love you, my country).⁴⁵ Only in Muḥammad Munīr’s popular song *Izzāy* is the patriotic love towards Egypt questioned, but this can be explained by it having been composed months before the revolution:⁴⁶ *w-intī-š ḥassa b-ṭibti izzāy? – izzāy ana rāfī ṛāsik w-inti btīḥni f-ṛāsi izzāy?* (And you are unable to feel my kindness – How come? / How come I am making you hold your head up high / while you are pushing my head to the ground, how come?)."

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Many songs underline the solidarity of Muslims and Christians. They suggest that the Egyptian nation consists of Muslims and Christians alike; their only aim is to live in peace and dignity. It is worth mentioning that these lines are the only ones where the terms Muslim and Islam are to be found. Typical are lines such as these by Egy Rap School: [umma maṣriyya muslima maṣḥiyya gayya ʾ ūl kifāya – hiyya balad walla ard ʾ iṣna fiha w-bi-nhibbaha hubb malūš ḥadd – walla gāmī gamb-i kinīsa wi-nās ʾ ayša ma ʾ ba ʾ d](#)⁴⁷ (The Egyptian nation, Christians and Muslims, suddenly said, 'It's enough!' / By God, it's the country we live in, and we love it immeasurably / A mosque stands next to a church

⁴² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsxyHbWY71s> <15.5.2013>.

⁴³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsxyHbWY71s> with more than 700,000 views. <1.12.2012>.

⁴⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEKmTBKiBM> <15.5.2013>.

⁴⁵ Rāmi Gamāl & ‘Azīz aš-Šāfi‘i: *baḥibbik ya bladi*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btXZMh5tHDA&feature=fvwre> <27.5.2013>.

⁴⁶ See also Sanders / Visonà: *The Soul of Tahrir* (see FN 2), 226-227.

⁴⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TH6Q6Ejh24Y&feature=related> < 15.5.2013>.

and the people live together). Another example comes from Hānī Šākīr's *Īd wahda*⁴⁸: *maṣr-i di balad il-maḥabba wi-t-tasāmuḥ wi-s-salāma – kull-i muslim aw masīḥi fiha 'āyiš wi-b-karāma* (Egypt is the country of love, tolerance and peace / Where every Muslim and every Christian can live in dignity). Very similar concepts are found in poems, too, as in Zāb Tarwat's *Ṣabaḥna nādi*.⁴⁹

Metaphors and stylistic devices

<23>

A separate study needs to be conducted on the use of metaphors. Suffice to say that colour and light are popular metaphors, for example *iftaḥ iṣ-ṣaḥḥa l-bēḍa – infux il-ġēma s-sōda* (Open the white page / And blow away the black cloud).⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, darkness stands for the regime and the past, whereas light (*nūr*) in general, or the full moon (*badr*) or a torch (*šū'la*) in particular are frequently used as symbols for a better future. On first inspection, it is remarkable that there are no seasonal metaphors related to the Arab Spring.⁵¹ Metaphors of spring were extremely popular in the songs and poems of the Revolution of 1848, which began in March.⁵² There may be two simple reasons for this absence: first, the Egyptian Revolution started in January, in a season that is cold even in Cairo, and second, the term "Arab Spring" was coined by the Western media, probably in allusion to the Prague Spring of 1968, and was only later used in the Arab media.

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Among the stylistic devices found in the songs are forms of *ġinās*, as in the line *ḍidd il-ḥukūma ḍidd il-ḥākīm wi-l-ḥukm* (Against the government, against the ruler and the authority), where Donjewan uses different words derived from the root *ḥkm*. In several songs, rhyme is used as an important stylistic device. Because of their euphony and prominent position at the end of a line, rhymes are perceived by the listener as being semantically connected. This device is used to connect positive (or negative) concepts as well as to emphasize contrasts.

⁴⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOBkxTJ6Als> <15.5.2013>.

⁴⁹ See Sanders / Visonà: *The Soul of Tahrir* (see FN 2), 233.

⁵⁰ *Egy Rap School: Sawra ša' biyya* (see paragraph 21).

⁵¹ An allusion to spring is found in a popular poem by 'Abdarrahmān al-Abnūdī: *iš-šabab il-badī' allabu xarifha rabī'* "The creative youth came out and turned autumn into spring". See Samia Mehrez: *Translating Revolution: An Open Text*, in: S. Mehrez (Ed.): *Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir*, Cairo / New York 2012, 213-248, here: 8.

⁵² One of the many examples are the following lines by the Austrian poet Herrmann Rollett, published in April 1848: "Das ist ein frohes Leben / Nach langer Traurigkeit / Die Blumen alle heben / Die Blütenflügel weit / Des Segens gold'ne Wolke / Berührte Baum und Strauch / Und sieh! im deutschen Volke / Erblüht der Frühling auch!"

Conclusion

<25>

The events of the revolution brought out enormous creative potential in all layers of popular culture; they "opened a floodgate of creative and radical energies."⁵³ The Egyptian music scene – until then almost entirely apolitical⁵⁴ – demonstrated its vitality by releasing numerous revolutionary songs in only a few weeks.⁵⁵ Jan Diggs described this very well on [his blog on 12 February 2011](#)⁵⁶: "From the spontaneous singing breaking out all over Tahrir Square to the gut-wrenching images accompanied by nationalistic lyrics and sweeping melodies to an angry piece written by a group of Arab-American rappers & musicians in solidarity with the demonstrators, the past two weeks were replete with 'rousing songs' – the anthems of Egypt's revolution."⁵⁷

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The products of this wave of songs were, of course, very different. On the whole, one can state that the lyrics of the rap and hip-hop songs were more demanding with regard to both style and content. In spite of the time gap, the following quote describing songs of the French Revolution characterizes very well the nature of the Egyptian songs of 2011: "Since revolutionary song culture was available to all, it would prove to be heterogeneous, capable of expressing the fears and aspirations of revolutionaries [...] while embodying the different competencies and modes of expression of amateurs and professionals."⁵⁸

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A theme common to the majority of songs is the desire to shape a better society for the beloved homeland, a society based on freedom (*ḥurriyya*) and dignity (*karāma*). Religion and external enemies are not an issue. In that sense the songs mirror a picture of the Egyptian Revolution corresponding to how it was perceived in Western media. This may not necessarily reflect the agenda of all the activists, but it very likely reflects the basic attitudes of the main proponents of the movement the songs' composers were part of. Most singers created an encouraging atmosphere of non-violence,

⁵³ <http://revolutionaryarabrap.blogspot.co.at/2012/02/how-has-arab-spring-changed-arabic-hip.html> <2.12.2012>.

⁵⁴ Compare Andrew Hammond: *Pop Culture Arab World! Media, Arts, and Lifestyle*, Santa Barbara / Denver / Oxford, 2005, 142.

⁵⁵ Not all songs were written from scratch. There are many connections between the new songs of the revolution and older songs or poems written by Aḥmad Fu'ād Nīgm or Šayx Imām. Compare Sanders / Visonà: *The Soul of Tahrir* (see FN 2), 222-226.

⁵⁶ <http://www.arabiainform.com/blog/2011/02/12/%E2%99%AA-you-say-you-want-a-revolution-%E2%99%AA-anthems-of-the-egyptian-revolution/> <15.5.2013>.

⁵⁷ <http://www.arabiainform.com/blog/2011/02/12/%E2%99%AA-you-say-you-want-a-revolution-%E2%99%AA-anthems-of-the-egyptian-revolution/> <1.12.2012>.

⁵⁸ Mason: *Singing the French Revolution* (see FN 15); 3.

solidarity and mutual understanding, and above all the bridging of religious and social boundaries. In this regard, the phrases and metaphors of Egyptian revolutionary songs often resemble those found in many songs of the 1968 and hippie movements.⁵⁹ Likewise, they frequently refer to the dreams of a whole generation to build a new and better society without oppression, as in Aḥmad Makkī's song *aḥlam*:⁶⁰

miš kifāya bass-i tiḥlam (It's not enough just to dream).

miš muhimm il-ḥilm-i ēh (It's not important what your dream is).

il-muhimm tit'ab titḥa''a' (It's important that you pursue),

kull illi inta ḥlimti bēh (Whatever you dream).

'ūm inḥat fi ṣ-ṣaxr (Stand up and hew the rock)

wi-ḥa''a' ḥilmak! (Realise your dream!)

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⁵⁹ A similar idea is expressed in Jean-Pierre Filiu: *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*, London 2011, 41.

⁶⁰ See FN 25.