

Essay

The Art of the Written Word + New Media Dissemination: Syria

Tarek Khoury

In this essay, Tarek Khoury, Lebanese designer, writer and Assistant Professor in graphic design at the Lebanese American University examines the visual characteristics of Syrian activist images and videos disseminated by way of online media. Through his examination, a unique coexistence of old and new media emerges. As Syrian activists handwrite on bits of scrap paper, walls and cardboard, their voices are expressed through traditional media forms. However, it is through new media that their expressions are recorded and circulated. The outcome is politically-charged imagery disseminated within the realm of new media communications but with an innately visceral, human aesthetic. This essay looks into the interconnections between traditional and new media as well

Image of Syrian orphan
carrying sign
<https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Intifada>



as changing perceptions of each due to their opposing intrinsic characteristics. Throughout the Middle East and particularly in Syria, this combination of media plays an important role within the revolt against tyranny.

For centuries, the art of the written word has held great significance in the Middle East. Historically, the people of this region considered letters as ‘the only worthy carriers of holy scriptures and divine revelations. They were the word of God materialized for human eyes to perceive. A separation between the visual appearance and the meaning of texts was unthinkable, like the separation of the body from its soul’.^[1] Similarly, visual imagery and visual culture are also inseparable. The images of the Middle East, much like its texts, are integral to its visual culture. Amidst the vastness of visual culture, there is currently imagery of protest and writing unique to the Middle East’s current state of drastic change. These images of writings are sited within new media contexts and therefore can be viewed from new perspectives. With the advent of the ‘Arab Spring’, the peoples’ voice, transcribed through visual contexts, has contributed to the challenging and overthrowing of repressive regimes.

Letters continue to be carriers, however today their message is one of revolt, freedom and humanity. A sense of spirituality and faith are still conveyed, yet with a different purpose and in new contexts. Even though technologies have always aided in political protest, today’s new media has the capacity ‘to jump over traditional boundaries of time and space.’^[2] Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen have come to witness an overthrow of powers with writing in new media playing a role. However, turmoil in Syria continues with an end that is not yet present or clear. The situation in Syria is critical and ever-evolving. One result is a prolific and ongoing outpouring of new media by Syrian activists. And, within this media, there are unique interconnections between handwriting and new technologies.

The terms ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ media are broad, encompassing a wide range of media forms. Within this essay, traditional media is used to refer to media involving paint, pen, pencil, marker, paper and cardboard for the sake of transcribing handwritten words. The term new media is used to refer to the Internet, online social media, as well as digital photography, text and video. As more and more Syrians gain access to the Internet and utilise new media, new potentialities for dissemination arise. Syrian activists are constantly doing at least one of the following: expressing, recording and/or disseminating. They are doing this as a means of survival, a much-needed outlet and a method to ensure that a global community is informed of the continuing atrocities taking place in Syria. The videos and images discussed in this essay are combinations of written word and image. Throughout history, the use of traditional media as a form of expression that protests and communicates is common.

[1] AbiFarés, Huda Smitschuijzen, *Arabic Typography: A Comprehensive Sourcebook*, London: Saqi Books (2001), p.13.

[2] Goodale, Gloria, ‘Libya, perfecting the art of revolution by Twitter’, in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2012: <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2011/0510/In-Libya-perfecting-the-art-of-revolution-by-Twitter>.

Traditional media examined in this essay range from graffiti, to a handwritten note, to a sign. These media forms gain new meanings as they are disseminated online. Additionally, as these media forms come to exist within virtual spaces, a new war arises. The Syrian regime uses the Internet as a platform for its own disseminations and applies Internet censorship within Syria. Counter to this, the Internet enables Syrian activists to experience the democratising capacities of the Internet as they become active producers and users within a virtual war zone.

There are five examples chosen for discussion in this essay, selected with certain criteria in mind. Each one utilises new media by way of dissemination on the Internet. They are all related to political activism regarding Syria's current revolution. Each one has at least two known online contexts. However, due to the nature of the Internet, with its potential for infinite paths and interconnected contexts, the possibilities to view, download, send and receive, are vast. In some cases, the examples were discovered as media within media. For example: a video on You Tube that is also within an online news story. Or, an image that is part of a scholarly article related to visual aspects of the Syrian revolution that is also on Facebook. In searching for examples, be they digital photographs or video, one example led to another. The wealth of imagery online relating to the Syrian revolution is overwhelming. The key component that focused this particular search was handwriting.

As a member of a faculty of graphic design, handwriting is of particular interest to me. Graphic design is a form of design to which letters are integral. Those letters may be handwritten or typographic. They may be a form of design alone or combined with imagery. Handwriting is the basis for calligraphic or script-style writing. This style of writing may be designed as typography, yet in the translation loses some of its unique irregularities. Typography is a set of designed characters. Originally, type was comprised of small metal bits, each one a different character. Characters were then placed next to each other to form words, sentences and paragraphs. These bits were inked and then pressed on paper. However, today's screen-based type is digital. It is an arrangement of type using computers. Within contemporary graphic design, which strongly relies on the computer, graphic designers at times turn towards illustration and hand-illustrated lettering to give their designs a personal feel. Graphic designers today integrate such lettering techniques in their digital works in order to break out of conventional digital aesthetics.

In looking at the imagery I found online related to the current Syrian revolution, I kept seeing handwriting. To my eyes, the imagery was something that communicated visually through a combination of word and image much in the same way that graphic design does. And it was doing so in a way that felt very personal to me. Some instances I found were intentional. For example, Horriyeh w Bas – a collective of Syrian youths living outside of Syria who have produced their own comedy sketches – animates their handwritten titles. In another instance, graffiti by an unknown writer was randomly captured in the background of a video activist's documentation.

Nonetheless, all the examples, though I viewed them within digital contexts, imparted the sense of being something very real and human. This is down to several factors: one is that handwriting was used rather than typography. At times, the handwriting alludes to a human presence and other times there are real people within the imagery. Additionally, the content of all the imagery is based upon inhumane acts happening all the time in Syria. The imagery itself is a humanitarian call for action.

Humanism in art typically refers to works created with a secular focus on people. Here however, I use the term humanism as a way to describe a kind of human presence within the imagery. It is a human presence that does not exist in a great deal of digital visuals, namely handwriting. What seems to give handwriting a human quality is actually its imperfections. Unlike a typeface, handwritten letters are never exactly the same. For example, each written 'a' is a bit different from other 'a's' one writes. Or in the case of Arabic, no two 'alephs' are ever exactly the same. Type, however, is thought of as well-studied and structured.

The spontaneity of handwriting is immediately evident as one watches a Syrian activist write an urgent note. In a video that is part of an article that appeared in the *Telegraph* online, entitled [Syria: Homs activists resort to pigeons to communicate](#), a handwritten message in blue ink on a small scrap of white paper reads: 'God willing, we will deliver them to you'. It is rolled and tied with string to a pigeon's leg in a video that depicts Syrian activists in Old Homs district using carrier pigeons to communicate with people in Bab Amr. They are trying to send supplies, medicine and food. The video ends with the pigeon taking flight and appearing as a gray silhouette against a blue and white sky. The context in which one views this video is that of a browser screen with a series of circulation options. One of the options is Twitter. This video link can be shared with others as a Tweet. In this instance, the Twitter bird, a white silhouette against a blue backdrop, alludes to a real-time version of the Syrian activists' carrier pigeon. Though carrier pigeons are a means of communication dating back to the time of Noah, and were used in wars throughout history, this context is unique, with its multiple layers of carriers and messages. Viewers watch a video of an actual bird, a human hand and handwriting on the streets of Syria juxtaposed with a screen-based interface, a vector Twitter icon, a cursor and an entourage of texts and interrelated links. This changes how one experiences the original message. In such instances, there is a unique coexistence between traditional and new media.

While some write on paper, others write on cardboard. Calligraphic-style writing in black marker against a brown cardboard backdrop reads: 'I am an orphan / Hafez killed my grandfather 2/16/1982 / Hama // Bashar killed my father 6/3/2011 / No Dialogue Friday'.^[3] This image was found in an online article entitled '[Visual aspects of the Syrian revolution](#)', published as part of the Syrian

[3] Stanton, Andrea L, 'Visual aspects of the Syrian revolution', in Syrian Studies Association Newsletter, 2012, Vol 17, No 1: <https://ojcs.siue.edu/ojs/index.php/ssa/article/view/2722/673>.

Studies Association Newsletter, Vol. 17, No.1 (2012) and according to the author Andrea L. Stanton, the image was also disseminated on Facebook. A hole has been cut from a protest sign constructed from what looks like a cardboard box to frame the carrier's head. The carrier is a boy, who looks directly at the viewer. The image becomes a kind of message. Rather than an email or a text message, it is a digital photograph message posted on Facebook. The boy's face is framed much like a profile picture, yet this image, with its handwritten lettering, communicates a human quality that goes beyond the capacity of a typed comment.

Profile pictures in social media are a visual representation of how people and organisations wish to visually represent themselves. Unlike the boy who framed his face in handwriting, the Freedom Wo Bas (also referred to as Horriyeh w Bas) Facebook page frames handwritten letters as a profile picture. In fact, throughout their Facebook page and You Tube channel, one can find instances of handwriting and graffiti. Horriyeh w Bas (Freedom Only) is a series of two- to three-minute episodes conveying events from the perspective of demonstrators on the ground. Presented as intimate conversations between two Syrian men, the sketches provide a comic critique of the Syrian people's tragic predicament. These screen shots actually came from more than one episode, which can also be found on their You Tube channel. Handwriting and graffiti writing is typically embedded within the episodes. It commonly exists within the background and at times comes to the foreground. From chalk-white letters against a dark grey wall, to blood-red spray paint on a scrap of cardboard, the writing found within the Freedom Wo Bas You Tube channel has more than 700,000 video views. In one episode, graffiti is sprayed onto a glass panel in front of the camera. This gives the illusion that the writing is floating. Viewers become the wall or surface that the words 'the people want to overthrow the regime' are sprayed upon. The Freedom Wo Bas examples in this essay are a little different than the others because they are created outside Syria. The people in the episodes are actors. The scenes are staged. Some of the writing is animated. The viewers watch it being written by an invisible hand and the writing serves as a kind of logo and as a protest. It is a raw, tactile and human intervention within the episodes, extracted from the visual aesthetic of the Syrian landscape.

While the Freedom Wo Bas episodes portray the predicament in Syria through the use of sets, scripts and actors, video activists document real footage. Like Freedom Wo Bas, handwriting and graffiti writing are embedded within the scenes shot. An online article in the UK's *Guardian* newspaper by Luke Harding entitled 'Syria's video activists give revolution the upper hand in media war' contains a documentary video with excerpts from activists' videos.^[4] Casualties bear handwritten labels, while the city streets showcase graffiti writing. One minute the viewer is watching a protest; then he

[4] Harding, Luke, 'Syria's video activists give revolution the upper hand in media war', *The Guardian*, 2012: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/01/syria-video-activists-media-war>.

or she is driving alongside a rifle-carrying activist; then staring at a corpse, and finally dodging an explosion. Slogans such as 'Freedom Forever' appear on the Syrian streets. A handwritten sign made from marker on paper is placed on the chest of a corpse. The sign bears the deceased's name and refers to the individual as a martyr whose death was brought by Assad's military troops and was God's will. Such writings are one of many layers as they appear within a video in a documentary posted online. This video can also be found on You Tube. And though video activists in Syria are using new technologies to document and disseminate atrocities as they occur, these activists are also capturing one of our most fundamental forms of communication - handwriting. These instances of handwriting provide a human presence that adds to the influential power of these activists' videos.

Handwriting is a distinctly human and telling means of visual expression. Graphologists would likely agree that handwriting is a human marking with uniqueness and individuality. Philip Hensher describes it as a lost art in his book *The Missing Ink: The lost art of handwriting (and why it still matters)*.^[5] In the majority of new media contexts, handwriting does appear to cede to typed texts. Yet, as the Syrian revolution shows, it is not a lost art. On the contrary, handwriting plays an integral role and exists within various facets. Even though much of the media in Syria is controlled by the ruling party, handwriting disseminated through new media is an outlet that empowers. Through the emergence of the web and activists' efforts to tap into blocked sites such as Facebook and You Tube, urgent and expressive handwritings can be viewed by an international community.^[6]

Throughout these examples, a unique aesthetic emerges: the digital documentation and dissemination of intrinsically human imagery. What may at first be overlooked due to its crude or ordinary appearance really is rather telling in regards to the Syrian people's current situation. Though the examples utilise new media and constitute visual imagery, I personally do not see them by any means as being 'new media' art. They do not intrinsically rely on the Internet for their existence, even though they exist online. They also lack a sort of interactivity that is meaningful to new media art. Yet, they are a form of self-expression that reflects Syrian culture and allude to an underlying potential that begins to ask questions of the future of Syria and new media art. It is hoped that new media art will emerge from a country whose media and technology are no longer censored, and that new media art can express the humanist quality of the written word shown to be integral to the Syrian people's voice. Though there are new media artists in the Middle East, this region is not yet recognised for its new media art. Syria is, however, using new media to disseminate traditional media in its most imperative of forms: a revolution.

[5] Hensher, Phillip, 'Why handwriting matters', The Guardian, 2012: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/oct/07/missing-ink-handwriting-art-hensher-extract>.

[6] Syria profile, 2012, BBC News Middle East: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703914>.