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Images of Protest

On the "Woman in the Blue Bra" and Relational Testimony

Kathrin Peters

In an incident during the protests in Cairo in December 2011, a woman is beaten up in broad daylight by Egyptian soldiers. Uniformed, helmeted men, about ten of them altogether, beat the woman, who is already lying on the ground, with sticks. In the course of the blows and kicks, being pulled and dragged about, her black abaya slides up and falls open. Underneath she is wearing jeans, trainers, and a blue bra. At this point, one of the men kicks her bared chest hard, as if her very nakedness has to be beaten and punished. Her torso flops lifelessly to and fro. Finally, one of the men covers the supine woman with the black fabric and leaves the scene, just as the camera pans up to show a crowd running away in the light of the setting sun. At the top, the recording bears the green logo of the Russian state broadcaster Russia Today.

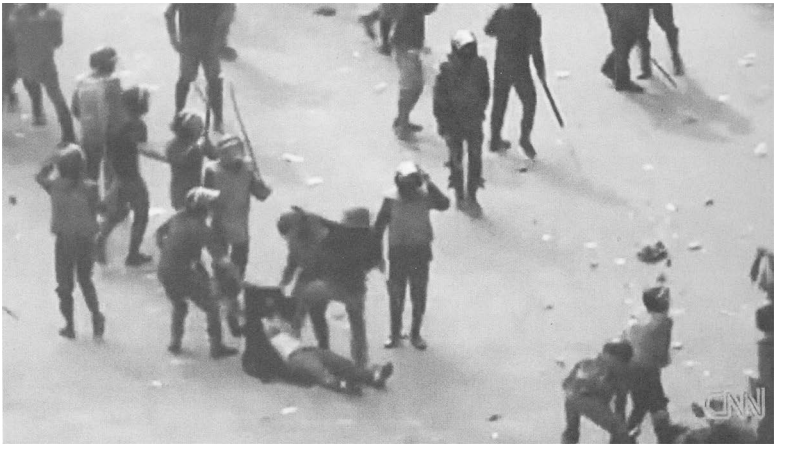


Fig. 1: Screenshot of the CNN report, Dec. 2011.

The video spread very quickly on the internet, and can still be viewed on various websites.[1] But what exactly does the clip show? Or, put another way, who sees what in it? For whose argumentation was it used? Where, in what context, and under what conditions does one come across a video in such a series of manifestations—some of them in fact transcending into other media? In my contribution, I wish to explore these questions with the example of the video, which quickly became known as "The Woman in the Blue Bra." This venture touches on the differentiation of center and periphery in two ways. Firstly, Cairo's Tahrir Square is seen through a center/periphery lens defined by media reporting conventions and post-colonial relationships. The peripheral attribution stems directly from an Occident/Orient distinction that is transported and perpetuated not least by ideas of gender progress and backwardness. Secondly, the video was disseminated under conditions that redefine the periphery question. Compared to the traditional institutions, the news and photo agencies with their geographical, architectural, and technical centers, this footage was circulated through peripheral channels. Just ninety seconds long, it joined the mass of authorless or unauthorized video clips circulating in social media to be linked, copied, and appropriated in blogs, sharing platforms, and news sites. Its diffusion has by no means remained restricted to the digital realm. Stills made their way back to the street, in graffiti and posters, even appearing as a cover image for print magazines both Egyptian and European. The established verification processes of editorial commissioning and selection barely function here. Instead, I argue, the scene acquires evidential character through repetition of use and a specific chain of images. Even if protest movements increasingly draw on media techniques to feed their dynamics, be these leaflets or wall newspapers, there is certainly no reason to parrot the talk of a Twitter or Facebook revolution, where social protest is handed over to social media corporations. But in view of the contemporary flood of digital images, the question remains how to conceive visual testimony.

1 | RT (Russia Today) is an international television news channel founded in 2005. For the video, cf. RT's "'Blue Bra Girl' Atrocity: Egyptian Military Police More Than Brutal," Isobel Coleman's article "'Blue Bra Girl' Rallies Egypt's Women vs. Oppression" on CNN, and "The Blue Bra Girl: The Shocking Video" on YouTube.

1. Street Politics and Vulnerability

If we consider the date of its publication, 18 December 2011, "The Woman in the Blue Bra" (or, belittling and eroticizing, the "Blue Bra Girl") tells us something about the political situation within the Egyptian protest movement at this specific point. In December 2011, parliamentary elections were in full swing, conducted by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Since the uprising began in January that year with huge demonstrations, mass detentions, and the occupation of Tahrir Square, the protests had never ceased; not even after Mubarak's resignation. But they did flare up again massively that December in response to the electoral rules imposed by the generals. The video also says something about how the street can be the place of protest and resistance and the location of assertion and maintenance of state power at the very same time. I will pursue that relationship in the following (even if it initially leads away from my starting question).

Urban streets and squares are places where bodies gather, where they are always exposed to the dangers of an equally embodied state power: a state power and authority expressed in the video in practically untrammeled violence. Those who take the risk, who expose their vulnerability, are not arguing for their rights simply through slogans, but above all with their bodies. Judith Butler, who I follow here, emphasizes in a recent text on street politics that "for the body to exist politically, it has to assume a social dimension—it is comported outside itself and toward others in ways that cannot and do not ratify individualism" ("Bodies in Alliance"). That means that the demands raised, i.e., the right to mobility, political and social participation, and recognition as equals, are already articulated and staged within the act of protest itself. Of course, as Butler concedes (if only to dispel any suspicion of political romanticism), physical gathering and exposure is not the only possible or meaningful expression of dissent. But it is highly appropriate where the issue is to assert the demand for habitable streets and squares in a performative act. As in the case of the testing of "horizontal relations" (Butler, "Bodies in Alliance") during the occupation of Tahrir Square.

These ideas of Butler stand in connection with her thoughts on an elementary vulnerability that affects every subject equally, in the sense that we are fundamentally dependent on others. But asserting an elementary vulnerability does not mean that political and social

norms, resource distribution, and center/periphery distinctions do not make people vulnerable in different ways; quite the contrary: Taken to extremes, particular lives do not fully count and are thus "ungrievable" (Butler, *Frames of War* 22). But Butler connects this specific vulnerability with an elementary form that applies to everybody, even the privileged, apparently invincible, to the extent that everyone stands in relationships and dependencies, is woven into a "set of relations" ("Bodily Vulnerability" 134). Dependency does not mean repression but constitutive relations to other people, life processes, and inorganic conditions of life.

In the context under consideration here, it is important, as Butler emphasizes in relation to street politics, that physical vulnerability and agency are not mutually exclusive. Bodies are not *either* vulnerable *or* viable. Instead they are always also vulnerable *in* their action, in their agency ("Bodily Vulnerability" 139). The opposition of strength versus weakness or vulnerability is just as irrelevant as the idea that resistance requires independence. In fact, the assertion of agency is intimately bound up with vulnerability, risking injury, as the "Woman in the Blue Bra" video makes abundantly clear: The violence strikes the woman in her act of demonstration, in her exposure, her assertion of the right to act. The violence, one could say, is directed at her assertion of agency. The assault she experiences cannot, of course, be explained solely in terms of elementary vulnerability, for female and gender-non-normative queer bodies have always been particularly subject to violence, especially when one considers that in many parts of the world—including Egypt—women's freedom of movement is just as restricted as their social and political participation. The female bodies visible on the street also expose structural and private violence against them. Gender power is exemplified in the female body. This does not only apply to women who wear an abaya over nothing but jeans and a bra—but it does apply to them in a specific manner, as is discernible in the video: The kicks are directed at the uncovered torso, the blue bra in its symbolism. "I don't believe this girl was veiled. You do not dress that way if you were veiled. She is a fake" (qtd. in Hafez 25) a woman tells an Egyptian television reporter, and a moderator comments: "Truthfully, what were you thinking wearing that abaya with nothing underneath" (qtd. in Hafez 25).[2] The woman associated with the

2 | Quotations originally from television programs Channel 1 and Nilesat, 18–21 December 2011.

blue bra is branded a *fake*. In a metonymic gesture she becomes the blue bra, and thus, under her Islamic veil, a fraud. Her manner of wearing hijab and abaya is interpreted as a false veiling or a veiling of the false, a false, non-normative femininity.

In relation to the nexus of vulnerability and agency Butler proposes, this interpretation by the television station is significant. Egypt's patriarchal order regards women as especially vulnerable, and protecting female vulnerability as integral to the male ethos (cf. Hafez 26). But in the moment when femininity is supposedly revealed as false, a question arises over which women deserve protection. A differentiation is drawn: On the one hand, the mood swings to the exclusion of the "Woman in the Blue Bra," making her injury ungrievable;[3] and on the other hand, abrogation of the male duty to female vulnerability engenders resistance. Ultimately, it is said, it was the recording of this incident and the dissemination of the video that created Egypt's largest women's movement to date (cf. El Shimi, "The Woman" 182).[4] Male marshals appeared to protect the women's protests, thus reinstating the normative gender order: female vulnerability under male protection. As Butler states, it is one and the same rationale of power that calls for protection of a supposedly especially vulnerable femininity—and pursues its exclusion (cf. "Bodily Vulnerability" 144). For paternalistic protection denies and undermines a capacity to take action that must by necessity risk vulnerability if it is not to be excluded in the protection of the domestic. Perhaps this is the point where it becomes unmistakably obvious that agency must go hand in hand with vulnerability if it is actually to represent resistance and not just decorum.

It has been criticized that the relationality in which Butler thinks relates solely to interdependencies between persons, but does not extend to dependencies on non-human actors (cf. Ott 52–54). However, her writings on protest movements and street politics certainly hint at an expansion of the concept of alliances to the non-human: simply because bodies are shaped and maintained in relation to infrastructural supports (or their defects), in relation to social and technological networks that are always economically and historically specific (Butler, "Bodily Vulnerability" 148).

3 | Hafez writes that the identity of the assaulted woman never became known (cf. 22).

4 | I would like to thank Florian Ebner for our discussions and the catalogue, without which this essay could not have been written.

The idea that bodies enter into connections with the street itself is a not uninspiring one, and one which leads away from assuming the exclusive dominance of the spoken to including forms of staging and performances on site. Urban architecture, city planning, and infrastructure enable and channel movements; here they are actants of uprising and carry levels of meaning into the protests: The historicity of squares and buildings grants occasions to speak, to assemble physically, and occupy them, to expose buried or denied meanings of these places (the square as a place of public gatherings, for example). But we can also go further and turn our attention to the digital media that are so significant in contemporary protest movements. Audio-visual recordings, whether analogue or digital, are essential to political impact, both in the local context and for global perception. This relation of global and local corresponds to a closeness of media technology and the human body. The popularity of digital gadgets worn close to the body, almost invisible but permanently transmitting and receiving, represents a danger to those who are recorded—and by implication also to those who carry them. Body and device enter a connection that far exceeds the character of instrumental media usage, an act of recording that integrates the body in its vulnerability. "It can be an effort to destroy the camera and its user, or it can be a spectacle of destruction for the camera, a media event produced as a warning or a threat," says Butler ("Bodies in Alliance"). The presence of a recording device alters the scene itself, triggers violent actions, precisely because anyone has the possibility to distribute the digital recording at any time. Recording devices thus not only report, but themselves become part of the scene and action to the extent that they (potentially) enable distribution beyond the local space. This is factored in by the actors and has already become one of the fundamental rights that are asserted.[5] In his "Pixelated Revolution" (2012), the artist Rahib Mroué addresses the connection of agency, vulnerability, and digital recording in a very existential manner. In a lecture performance, Mroué montages video footage from mobile phones from suspected regime opponents shot dead during the Syrian protests. The videos, which Mroué found on YouTube, function as visual remains

5 | "So the media not only reports on social and political movements that are laying claim to freedom and jusitce in various ways; the media is also exercising one of those freedoms for which the social movement struggles" (Butler, "Bodies in Alliance").

documenting the shooting of people discovered filming by soldiers; "they are recording their own death," as Mroué puts it with deliberate drama. We see blurred scenes such as could be recorded by a falling camera, from which Mroué, in a visual analysis of forensic dimensions, derives meaning and ultimately evidence.[6]

2. Follow the Video

Against the background of these thoughts, let us follow the video "The Woman in the Blue Bra": the possible circumstances of its origination and some of the channels by which it has been disseminated and modified. Let us look again more precisely. It was published on 18 December 2011 at 10:23 a.m. on *rt.com*. The recording dates from the previous day. The scene showing the woman's mistreatment lasts just a few seconds; the video also contains other material, including soldiers storming the tented camp on Tahrir Square. Authorship is not noted, aside from the station logo denoting ownership. Nor is it discernible whether the recordings originated from a single source (or even a single device) or whether this is a montage of material from different sources. The recordings could have been made by a Russia Today reporter, or they could more likely be amateur material, for example mobile phone clips made by bystanders and sent or sold to a news agency. The style of the footage, characterized by rapid panning and zooming, reflects above all the suddenness of the events; even a professional might never have found the opportunity for aesthetic composition. No longer is it exclusively professional reporters who are where the action is with a camera. Participants and bystanders have cameras and phones up and ready to record acts of violence and preserve the recordings as documentary evidence. Nor do distribution channels today require professional access to editorial structures with staff, equipment, and communications (historically that meant messengers and couriers, telegraph, telephone, fax, and computers). Publishing online, on YouTube, Facebook or blogs, has become a simple matter, although a distribution list of the kind available to news agencies is certainly helpful.

6 | Rahib Mroué's live lecture performance has been staged at various venues, including documenta13, where large-scale prints from the phone footage were also shown (cf. Krautkrämer).

No matter how spectacular the video, one can never fully depend on viral dissemination. So much can be said: In a digital age of social media, camera phones, and smartphones—in other words since the 2000s—the production and distribution of digital media have become 'democratized' or 'deprofessionalized,' depending on the point of view. Eyewitness reports by those involved (lauded as 'citizen journalists,' although if there is one thing they are not, it is journalists) are also highly regarded by commercial agencies. They substitute for the sense of 'being there' photojournalism has always sought but reporters can never fulfil properly when events occur so fast; ultimately, their local knowledge will always be inferior. During the protests in Egypt and other North African countries, Western journalists were content to observe and document the protests from places of safety: living in hotels, photographing from a distance (sometimes in fact from the hotel balcony),[7] and mainly interviewing English-speaking activists.

In the perspective of the English-speaking Egyptian filmmaker Philip Rizk, who has dissected this situation, Western journalists were seeking, above all, representations that confirm their concept of a non-violent liberation movement, in the sense of a democratization according to the Western model. "Only the fixation of certain images seen in daylight through the lens of a camera on Tahrir Square could appease you with that impression" (54), he writes in his "Open Letter to an Onlooker":

> Other industries soon followed suit: hard on the heels of the journalists came academics, filmmakers, the world of art, and NGOs, all relying on us as the ideal interpreter of the extraordinary. They all eventually bought into and further fueled the hyper-glorification of the individual, the actor, the youth subject, the revolutionary artist, the woman, the non-violent protester, the Internet user. (54)

For Rizk that is an ignorance of both the violence and of the heterogeneity of the interests driving the protests. Rizk belongs to a group of artists and activists who ran the media collective Mosireen during the protests. Mosireen collected testimonies, audio-visual recordings in which eyewitnesses, the injured, and friends and relatives of the dead recorded their

7 | Cf. the photo series by Peter von Agtmael of the renowned agency Magnum, in Ebner and Wicke, *Cairo*, 55, 56, and 129.

versions of events—and contradicted the official versions.[8] According to Mosireen, documentations are not self-explanatory, but must be contextualized and interpreted. They need a framing that clarifies and corrects: Who is showing what to whom, and who or what is being left out. By contrast, the post-colonial historical discourse perceives only an emancipatory movement pursuing 'Western' values, striving against Islamism and dictatorship and for women's emancipation. Protests against capitalism, neo-liberalism, and economic imperatives—in other words against decidedly 'Western' norms—are simply not perceived or in fact not perceptible. Of course, equality for women and for gays and lesbians is by no means automatically given within Islamic communities, and those are values I regard as non-negotiable. But in view of the enthusiasm with which gender inequalities in Islamic countries are highlighted, despite gender equality having been achieved at best on paper in the West, Gabriele Dietze rightly speaks of an "Occidental dividend" ("Okzidentalismuskritik" 35; "Decolonizing" 263): That is to say, in contrast to the supposed other, we may regard ourselves as more 'progressive' than we actually are, while the other appears more 'backward' than they are.

On the very day of publication, various modifications of the "Blue Bra" video appeared on YouTube: One of these is backed with mournful singing and written commentary in Arabic (cf. "Brutal Egypt Security Force"), another has a trailer from FIN (Freedom Informant Network) and English-language text (cf. "Disturbing Video"). In both cases the video is given a moving, but also agitating framing. It is certainly probable that it may have circulated in e-mail and blogs before appearing on *rt.com* and then CNN, which might explain the simultaneous appearance of versions already provided with framing and commentary in diverse contexts. It is the explicit potential of digital images that they can be processed and modified by their users, which is not to say that there is always a fundamental question mark over their veracity. The quality of the technical image as a record of real events remains intact. What is added to the image are interpretations of events, reading instructions for an always negotiable truth. One user subjects the "Blue Bra" video to a virtually forensic reading

8 | Cf. *mosireen.org*. The videos are also available on a YouTube channel and on *Vimeo*. Mosireen also runs workshops where in particular rural citizens are equipped with media technology and shown how to use it.

using red frames to pick out details (cf. Creighton):[9] He shows that the woman was accompanied by at least two male demonstrators. One of the two manages to break free and flee, while the other is kicked and beaten, as are two passers-by who initially walk past the edge of the scene but seconds later are lying helpless on the ground. One member of the group of military police is identified as particularly brutal and unrestrained; this is a man wearing trainers rather than army boots and he is, it would appear, restrained by the others—not terribly firmly, rather hesitantly and unsuccessfully. Here, in the event itself, we witness the different ways of dealing with the violence against the "Woman in the Blue Bra" that re-emerge in the later discussion: the problem of paternalism versus the suspension of male protection, the ambivalence of risking one's skin or fleeing …

Also on 18 December, the *Tahrir Newspaper* published a still from the "Blue Bra" video, freezing the moment when the woman's bare torso is kicked. This is plainly a manipulated frame or screenshot, as the original shows the event from a distance and quite blurred (noting that the designation "original" serves as a crutch here). The person who made the recording of the "Woman in the Blue Bra" first had to seek out the motif in and through the viewfinder or display of the recording device. The camera, whatever kind it was, picks out victim and perpetrators in the crowd, loses sight of them, then finds the scene again. The recordings are notably without sound. I imagine otherwise one would hear shouting and indications that helped to visually locate the thugs in the crowd. Alongside the acts of violence it documents, the video therefore also evidences something else, namely, the difficulty of focusing. As such it points to both the events and the circumstances of their recording. The motion of the searching camera, and consequently of its images, corresponds to the conditions under which the video was made. And it is precisely this contingency and spontaneity, the rapidity and confusion captured in the images, that confirm the authenticity of the events. They remind us that the event was by no means completely unexpected; in a certain sense *something* was expected to happen. But at the same time neither this concrete moment nor the specific person were foreseeable (cf. Derrida). So while here it is precisely the searching movement and blurring that

9 | A post in the rather obscure blog: willyloman.wordpress.com/2011/12/19/blue-bra-girl-video-a-remarkable-story-of-horror-and-heroism/.

confirm the authenticity of the recording, those indications of origin have little bearing on other registers. The idea that the more grainy or pixelated a photograph, film, or video recording, the more authentic, is nothing but ill-conceived formalism. Yet a blurred freeze-frame is unsuited as an iconic image for a front page. As well as enlarging the relevant detail, the still selected for the newspaper must at least have been subjected to later post-focusing, for neither analogue nor digital images gain in sharpness and precision when enlarged. Quite the opposite: Enlarge far enough and all that remains is grain or pixels, the technical materiality of the image, and certainly no gain in iconicity of the kind required in the text/image context of the newspaper page. The color must have been adjusted too, as the blue bra now contrasts dramatically with the soldiers' camouflage trousers. The iconic front page image fits the 'decisive moments' paradigm upon which photojournalism has based its impact since the 1950s.[10] So while the low resolution of the digital image—its overall 'poor' quality—is the precondition for endless uploading and forwarding, the image must be aesthetically and technically improved as soon as it comes to reproduction in a print medium, in other words in a 'classical' distribution medium. According to Hito Steyerl, 'poor images' are low-resolution digital images that circulate without reproduction rights (or whose copyright is ignored) and whose potential lies in forming political networks, new public spheres, and archives beyond established bodies and companies (cf. 32–33). Within the chain of "Blue Bra" images, such a 'poor' image is certainly a decisive trigger—but one that dovetails into the image strategies of established commercial agencies and their monetization strategies. After diffusing through various networks, the images bear marks and signatures that contradict both the division into public and counter public and the strict distinction between analogue and digital. The chain of reproductions and appropriations of the "Blue Bra Girl" video does not come to a halt even when the 'poor' video image is enriched to create a still. Instead it migrates back into the digital networks. Unlike a video, a still can be used on the street: In subsequent demonstrations the front page of *Tahrir News* was held aloft for the cameras.[11] Soon enlarged and cropped versions were

10 | The concept of the decisive moment originates from Henri Cartier-Bresson (cf. Peters).

11 | Cf. Rowan El Shimi's Flickr album "Kasr El Einy Street Street Battle Dec 18 ..." and the references in Ebner and Wicke, *Cairo*.

appearing on protest marches, especially the Women's Protest March on 21 December, now in poster quality bearing the byline Reuters/Stringer.[12] "On the street, before the eyes and cameras of the media, the images were now fished out of the flood of digital images to become image objects, and immediately fed back into it," argues Tom Holert (61). "Image objects" can be held in the hand and displayed, not only in the local surroundings but also in subsequently circulated images showing the image objects together with the subjects carrying them. Hundreds of photographs of these demonstrations grouped by theme, motif, and event can be found on Flickr, complete with image objects and mobile phones held aloft by the crowd. Some of these photographs also appear on gallery walls outside Egypt, where some of the Egyptian photographers have attained fame (and wealth) (cf. "Cairo. Open City.").



Fig. 2: Aly Hazza'a, Women's Protest March to the Press Syndicate, Cairo, 20 Dec. 2011.

12 | Cf., for example, Kainaz Amaria's photo story "The 'Girl In The Blue Bra'" published on *npr.org*. "NPR is a mission-driven, multimedia news organization and radio program producer. [...] We are enthusiastically embracing digital media platforms and culture."

The adaptations and appropriations of the "Woman in the Blue Bra" appear in different places in different media with a range of genre references: A graffito appeared on Tahrir Square with the blue bra as an element of a Superwoman costume. The Brazilian caricaturist Carlos Latuff drew a blue bra scene imagining the woman's revenge. Murals echoed the style of martyr portraits; the blue bra turned up as a graffiti stencil. It has gelled into a symbol capable of encapsulating the entire situation. Whereas such adaptations of the image articulated a concept of female empowerment beyond and outside a supposedly vulnerable femininity and its paternalistic protectors, there were also collages showing the blue bra montaged onto the Egyptian flag, thus containing the women's movement within the nation (cf. El Shimi, "The Woman" 182).

Corporative, artistic, and more or less illegal appropriations of the images produced a mise-en-abyme, a sequence of images each related to the other; and not only a sequence of images, but also of persons who made them and in the process exposed themselves in different ways. The digital cameras and smartphones they carried with them were an essential part of this set of relations, this relationality. For these devices enable easy ad hoc distribution, or at least threaten that in the eyes of the regime. Thus, the protests are not only recorded and documented; the *recording* changes the protest movement, indeed becomes a part of it.

If it were possible to summarize this fragmenting proliferation of images, technical devices, and bodies, of architecture, slogans, and actions, it would be in two points with which I close this text.

1. Every reproduction of reality is subject to intentions to show and tell, which subject the recording to a process of selection and framing and place it in a specific context, which is already saturated with (ideally refutable) presuppositions. Accumulated evidence is the outcome of interaction between a wide range of elements, which cannot be reduced to any variety of determinism, whether technological, social, or political in nature, but instead places all these elements in relation to one another. With respect to digital media and the technologies for distributing, linking, and reproducing, we find that the possibilities of image manipulation, commentary, and circulation—the chain of images produced by digital retransmission—claim a decisive share in what is evidenced and how certainty is produced. Testimony has been shunted into an always controvertible space of negotiation where credibility is generated.

2. These testimonies and the technological means of capturing and recording are not mere tools providing images or recorded voices of a political event that would have been the same without these recordings. Following Judith Butler's theory of assembly, these technologies provide possibilities of appearance in the visual field (*Notes Toward* 19). Bodies gathering in social movements—what might include social networking in the virtual domain—are enacting by their appearance what they claim and are protesting for. Media technologies make part of this set of relations through which the protesting and resisting body appears and enacts. That does not mean that every gathering or assembly can be understood as a form of resistance. In the contrary, collectives orchestrated by states or groups claiming to be 'the people' already presume who is included and who is excluded. But it is crucial that "vulnerability and resistance can, and do, and even must happen at the same time" (Butler, *Notes Toward* 141).[13]

Translation: Meredith Dale

Images

Fig. 1: Screenshot of the CNN report, Dec. 2011. From: *Cairo: Open City: New Testimonies from an Ongoing Revolution*, edited by Florian Ebner and Constanze Wicke, p. 182.

Fig. 2: Aly Hazza'a, Women's Protest March to the Press Syndicate, Cairo, 20 Dec. 2011. From: *Cairo: Open City: New Testimonies from an Ongoing Revolution*, edited by Florian Ebner and Constanze Wicke, p. 183.

13 | Slightly modified translation of "Bilder des Protests: 'The Woman in the Blue Bra' und relationale Zeugenschaft." Periphere Visionen: Wissen an den Rändern von Fotografie und Film, edited by Heide Barrenechea, Marcel Finke, and Moritz Schumm, Courtesy of Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2016.

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