Digitally Mediated Art in the War Zone: The Aesthetics of Resilience in Yemen

Nurgul Oruc

Abstract

The current civil war in Yemen has been largely ignored by mainstream media, with the majority of coverage spotlighting the military aspect of the conflict. Yemeni artists challenge this absence of narratives reflecting the suffering of thousands of Yemeni men, women, and children by exposing the actual situation to the outside world through various artifacts shared on digital media platforms. Despite the significance of contemplating creative endeavors in conflict zones and the burgeoning interest in cultural production both during and after the Arab Spring in the Middle East, contemporary Yemeni creative expressions have been largely neglected by scholars working on the Middle East. This article traces how Yemeni artists have intervened in the representation of the conflict and war in Yemen since 2011. It analyzes the heterogonous artistic forms, contents, and representational strategies that Yemeni artists and filmmakers have employed to express their collective concerns over war and destruction. The constraints and limitations imposed by the conflict have also shaped the creative expressions of Yemeni wartime artists, especially in terms of sharing their work both with their own communities and with the wider world. While their creative work manifests the suffering of a nation, it also constitutes a refusal to live under weakness and lack of hope for the future. The concepts of tactical and participatory media and socially engaged art are used to refer to the production and dissemination of a variety of creative responses to the ongoing crisis in Yemen, as illustrated through selected art media forms.

"Art gives hope and expresses the situation in which people are living. It is the voice of people. In war, all voices are voices of hatred and destruction. What we do is to show that there are other voices people can listen to. In times of war, even the smallest voices may save lives" (Masri 2017). These

Corresponding author: Nurgul Oruc, Qatar University, P.O. Box: 2713 Doha, Qatar. E-mail: n.oruc@qu.edu.qa

are the words of Murad Subay, a graffiti artist and activist in Yemen, who, like many other Yemeni artists, uses his creative skills as a civic engagement medium to narrate and disseminate the unseen (and untold) realities of the ordinary people of Yemen and their experiences of a brutal conflict. The current civil war in Yemen – an area previously known as *Arabia Felix* or *Happy Arabia* – has been largely ignored by mainstream media, with coverage spotlighting the military aspect of the conflict and the humanitarian disaster (Bonnefoy 2018). Yemeni artists have challenged this absence of narratives reflecting the suffering of thousands of Yemeni men, women, and children by exposing the actual situation to the outside world through various productions shared on digital media platforms. In the absence of any state-mediated sources of national belonging (Wedeen 2009), grassroots creative art expressions in Yemen have played an important role in sustaining and performing collective solidarity and identification in a war-torn state.

A plethora of art forms has thrived in conflict zones of the Middle East and North Africa, especially in Palestine, Egypt, and Tunisia, as a means to communicate the despair of impacted individuals and communities in times of crises (Gröndahl 2012; Omri 2012; Downey 2014; LeVine 2015; Schriwer 2015; Kraidy 2016a; Slitine 2018). One of the most distinguishing features of the artistic expressions that have emerged from and responded to political and military conflicts of the past decade across MENA is the wide range of use of digital media technologies, tools, platforms, and creative forms. Civic activist art and media expressions are increasingly shaped by digital affordances. These affordances enabled individuals to not only document, represent, and disseminate the given political crisis but also to generate awareness and galvanize civic activism around it. They "served to create a space in which citizens appeared in public, came before each other, and entered into forms of civic dialogue by means of images" (Elias 2017, 20). The endurance and traveling capacity of the digital image has strongly shaped the image politics of conflict, dissent, and protest in the Middle East (Khatib 2012).

However, despite the significance of contemplating creative endeavors in conflict zones and the burgeoning interest in cultural production both du-

ring and after the Arab Spring in the Middle East, contemporary Yemeni creative expressions have been largely neglected by scholars working on the Middle East. This article traces how Yemeni artists (mostly self-taught amateurs), working across rich arrays of art and media, have intervened in the representation of the political, economic, and social struggles Yemenis have suffered as a result of conflicts and war since 2011. This article argues that prominent Yemeni artists have employed heterogeneous artistic forms that they have digitally mediated to the public in order to express their collective concerns over war and destruction. The constraints and limitations imposed by the conflict have also shaped the creative expression of Yemeni wartime artists. While their work manifests the suffering and struggles of a nation, it also constitutes a refusal to live under weakness and a lack of hope for the future. The concepts of tactical media, participatory culture, and socially engaged art are used to explain the production, dissemination, and digital mediation of a variety of creative responses to the ongoing crisis in Yemen, as illustrated through selected art media. Personal websites and social media accounts of the artists, YouTube videos, and interviews (via skype and email) are used as primary sources of assessing the scope of their creative works. In addition, the article draws on scholarships that have been produced on art and media production in conflict zones, with a particular focus on the Middle East.

Yemen since 2011

As with many Middle Eastern countries that have experienced the upheavals generically known as the Arab Spring, the uprising in Yemen in 2011 stemmed from years of dissatisfaction with longstanding political, economic, and social conditions. The deposed president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who remained in power for 33 years, was succeeded by his previous deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansoor Hadi, with the stated aim of holding legitimate presidential and legislative elections within a year as the head of the interim government. However, the previous president continued to cling to power by establishing an alliance with a former enemy, the Houthis – a group with a history of uprisings against the government over the previous decade. In September 2014, the Houthis forces, backed by Saleh, captured the city of

Sana'a, followed by the seizure of Hadi's palace, thus forcing the interim government to resign. A coalition of Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia and with the support of the United States of America subsequently supported Hadi, providing logistics, arms, and intelligence, as well as launching airstrikes against the Houthi–Saleh alliance in March 2015 (Hill 2017).

The escalation of the armed conflict following the intervention of the coalition forces evolved into a war that has taken a considerable toll on Yemen. The war in Yemen has been called "The world's worst man-made humanitarian crisis" by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED 2019), more than 100 thousand Yemenis had been killed by the fighting and bombing since 2015. In April 2020, approximately 24.1 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance out of an estimated population of 29 million, with half the population in acute need (OCHA 2020). With over a million cases of cholera and facing the threat of the COVID-19 epidemic, only half of Yemen's health facilities were functioning (WHO 2020). The World Food Programme estimated in December 2018 that 20.1 million Yemenis were "severely food insecure" (WFP 2020). Two million children under the age of five are suffering from acute malnutrition and seven million children are out of school (UNICEF 2020). Yemen is thus at the brink of total social and economic collapse, with the majority of ordinary Yemenis entrapped in violence and the power games of the parties involved in the conflict. Despite the magnitude of the war and the uncertain future of the country, Yemeni activists, artists, and amateurs discussed in this article project resistance and hope through alternative tactical and participatory art media.

Tactical and Participatory Media

Tactical media, coined by David Garcia and Geert Lovink (1997), refers to the "crisis, criticism and opposition" media that have emerged thanks to affordable technologies and communication outlets. They are the kinds of media used by social groups that are invisible in mainstream narratives such as activists, hackers, and protestors. According to Garcia and Lovink (1997),

tactical media deploy all forms of media (old, new, lucid, and sophisticated) and utilize free spaces in the media landscape to draw attention to pressing political issues and transcend rigid dichotomies such as amateur versus professional, alternative versus mainstream and private versus public. Tactical media, in other words, is "the media of states of emergency. When certain social groups, for whatever reasons, are excluded from mainstream narratives, they employ alternative media to get their message across without falling prey to state censorship or the power-laden gatekeeping practices of establishment media" (Karimi 2017, 733). Even though tactical media contribute to social and political change by drawing attention to existing problems and thus provide an alternative to mainstream media content, however, they do not challenge all forms of social, economic, and political domination or lead to revolutions. As Rita Raley (2009, 28) states: "With the recognition that there is no getting outside the global techno–military–economic world order, tactical media thus performs a sociopolitical intervention by gesturing only obliquely toward a better world in the future."

Another concept that is central to user-generated content is that of participatory culture. Initiated by media and communications scholar, Henry Jenkins (2006, n.p.), participatory culture refers to "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices." Participatory culture thus enables individuals to engage with the production, as well as the consumption, of artistic artifacts. Its pluralist approach offers opportunities for self-representation and the documentation of individual or collective stories. It also encompasses "alternative media in which individuals and communities share personal stories and collective experiences, often with the goal of raising awareness about a specific issue" (Norman 2009, 273). Participatory art forms generate (real and virtual) spaces in which citizens and communities can shape and unfold the interpretation of the events that take place in their country and project their visions of the future.

Tactical and participatory media have become a new and innovative venue for artists concerned about the world they live in. Socially engaged arti-

sts are those committed to social justice by means of their creative work, and that, in order to intervene, they need to trespass on a complex field of power (Thompson 2015, 20). The gains of participatory culture, as well as the affordances of digital media technologies, enable artists to extend their visibility and social connectivity. This is particularly significant for socially engaged artists within zones of conflict with asymmetric power dynamics, in which inequalities and injustices prevail. Examining production and dissemination of art in the midst of a conflict demonstrates how "older and newer mediums of communication for relaying political claims intersect to formulate a synthesized – though still polyvocal – narrative of personal and national experience" (Li and Prasad 2018, 494). The conveniences of digital media technologies (low production costs, free space, ease of content dissemination and network formation) consequently have enabled an increase in artistic civic engagement and a wide array of creative expressions of social problems in Yemen.

Through a convergence of politics, traditional and global art practices, tactical media, and participatory culture, Yemeni activist artists responded to the current crisis in Yemen, particularly addressing (1) the destruction and rupture resulting from the war; (2) the despair and hope of the population; (3) the increase in political consciousness as well as individual and social endurance; and (4) the imagination of restoration and awakening. The following sections discuss the creative expressions of Yemeni activist artists in selected art media forms.

Street Art: To "Plant a Flag" in a Public Space

Street art consists of visual entities "planted"[1] on street walls in the form of graffiti, stencils, and murals to address social and political issues. Its political origins are rooted in the counterculture movements of the 1960s and it has been welcomed in some communities as an attempt to beautify urban landscapes and as a community-building activity. However, it has also been criticized as illegal and associated with crime and vandalism, since it can damage public and private property, break the law, and disturb the social order (MacDonald 2014). This raises the issue of the use of street art in spaces already destroyed by violence, war, and conflict. The emergence of

street art as a communicative space in the Middle East dates back to the Lebanese civil war and the first Palestinian intifada in Gaza and has been widely deployed as a protest aesthetic, a counter-narrative tool, and a community-centered art form in the region (Kraidy 2016a; MacDowall and de Souza 2018; Sinno 2017; Peteet 1996; Gruber 2008). Scholars studying the use of street art in conflict situations in Northern Ireland, Palestine, and Egypt have suggested that street art in conflict zones becomes "a means of political resistance by envisioning competing futures, inscribing memory and critically commenting on political events" (De Ruiter 2015, 582). Digital communication technologies have given street art an unprecedented level of visibility, popularity, and virality across the globe to the extent that some scholars have claimed that street art has not only been "revolutionized" (Molnár 2017, 400) by the proliferation of digital tools and platforms but also has emerged as "the first truly post-Internet art movement" (Taş 2017, 802) in terms of utilizing the affordances of the digital space to shift from "a local, context determined form of expression [to] a translocal spatiality" (Kraidy 2013, 18).

In Yemen, street art has surfaced as a vehicle for the expression of grievances and hope as well as reclaiming order and peace in landscapes that have been destroyed by the war. Moreover, it has served as a means of civil disobedience and political participation that brings the community together in solidarity in the creation of visual narrations of conflict experienced by Yemenis themselves (Alviso-Marino 2013). Following the uprisings of 2011 and the destruction from bombing in Sana'a, Yemeni self-taught painter, Murad Subay, took his art from the privacy of his home to the streets, transforming it into a communal project (Alles 2015, 9). Subay chose street art because of its ease and power for communicating messages to local and international communities (Alviso-Marino 2017, 5). "The spirit of ours," states Subay, "is damaged and this is what led me to launch the street art campaigns and this is the reason why people participate. Walls now are the voice of us" (Another Scratch in the Wall 2014). His decision to undertake street art campaigns, in other words, results from the impact of the destruction on the souls of Yemenis and their need to heal from the grievances by means of art.

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In 2012, Subay launched his first public campaign on Facebook, which he called *Color the Walls of Your Streets*, and invited ordinary Yemenis to paint spaces left in ruins by violent confrontations between regime forces and protestors during the uprisings. The campaign became highly successful. Not only did it attract participants from all walks of life to participate in painting collectively but also it fostered media coverage (Alviso-Marino 2017, 6). Following the first campaign, Murad Subay later continued to organize more art campaigns. In 2013, he launched *The Walls Remember Their Faces* campaign in which he stenciled on the walls of streets in Sana'a the portraits of forcibly disappeared activists, journalists, and citizens. The participants contributed to the campaign in various ways, such as painting stencils, bringing images of disappeared family members and friends to create new stencils, and to demand an explanation from authorities about the cases of enforced disappearance. This contentious campaign, thus, "not only served to point out an issue of social concern but also triggered a larger process of collective memory recovery" (Alviso-Marino 2017, 7). In his subsequent campaign *12 Hours* in 2013, Subay continued to draw attention to Yemen's dreadful political and social issues, while advocating for national unity and a civil state.

Since the start of the conflict in March 2015, a large number of buildings in Yemen have been destroyed and have thus lost their practical use. However, the artistic intervention has enabled Sana'a's ruins to become charged with metaphors for the fate of the Yemeni nation and its land. In May 2015, Subay launched another campaign, called *Ruins*, in the Bani Hawwat area of Sana'a, where airstrikes had resulted in the death of 27 civilians, including 15 children (Figure 1). This campaign addressed pressing social and economic problems deepened by the recent airstrikes, including sectarianism, poverty, hunger, diseases, and the destruction of houses, schools, and hospitals. Equally important, the *Ruins* campaign aimed at drawing attention to the devastating consequences of the conflict on children and families. Subay placed his stenciled art on the ruins of a neighborhood school that was destroyed by airstrikes led by coalition forces. A painting that depicts a child handling a bomb is circled with the statement "Children Without School," thus suggesting that children who lack schooling can easily beco-

me targets for extremist groups. Similarly, in *Family Photo*, Subay inscribed the image on a house destroyed by an airstrike in North Sana'a, where the only survivors of the family who once lived were a father and his one-year-old daughter (Alfred 2016). Subay's street art not only communicate messages of resilience but also inscribe loss and hope on buildings damaged by a brutal war.

Figure 1. Murad Subay, *Ruins*, street art, digital images. (Subay 2015–17)

Paintings in the streets and on damaged structures display the devastating impact of the conflict and the trauma that Yemen has suffered as a result of the war. Murad's subsequent campaign *Faces of War*, launched in 2017 is another attempt to visualize the toll the war has taken on the lives of what he calls "lost generation." In this campaign, he uses the human body as a communicative medium, symbol, and metaphor and places his artistic activism (like his counterparts in other conflict zones in the Middle East) in the "seesaw of bodies-in-pain and bodies-in-paint" (Kraidy 2016b, 207). The murals in this campaign consist of portraits of faces that suffer from hunger and paintings of bodies with lost parts and wounds (Figure 2). Referring to one of the murals which he painted as part of this campaign on a wall in one of the streets in London, which he titled *Hollowed Mother* (Figure 3), Subay (2020) states that he has nothing left to say about the "silenced catastrophe" in Yemen and that the naked mother represents Yemen, "a naked country left with nothing, but factions backed by regional and international powers fighting with each other." That is why Subay has shifted his focus to cam-

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paigning against the arms trade. After leaving Yemen in 2018, he launched another campaign in 2019 called *Bon Appétit*, with murals painted on the streets of the UK and France – two European countries that are known to have supplied arms to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. The campaign aims to draw public attention to Western governments' arms trade that continues to fuel the war in Yemen (Figure 4).

Figure 2. Murad Subay, *Faces of War*, street art, digital images. (Subay 2017–19)

Figure 3. Murad Subay, *Hollowed Mother*, street art, digital images. (Subay 2017–19)

Figure 4. Murad Subay, *Bon Appetit*, street art, digital images. (Subay 2018–19)

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Murad Subay envisions his artistic endeavors as a source of resilience, determination, and hope in a time of hardship. While he acknowledges the limits of his work to remedy the catastrophic situation in Yemen, he regards his

artistic endeavors as a means of maintaining hope and breaking the silence. "To see the reality on the ground," he points out, "makes one feel pessimistic; but we cannot live without hope… Art is like breathing" (Subay 2020). Subay's statement reveals the urgency and significance of the communicative power of street art for a country like Yemen, which has been pushed to invisibility by the regional intervening actors.

Subay's street art campaigns have also elicited civic engagement and public participation. Since 2015, Subay has organized an annual open day of art events in March during which community members come together to paint the walls of their streets (Figure 5). Commenting on the reception of his art events by local communities, he states: "I would not continue without the support of the communities in Yemen. They see street art as something that belongs to them and as something that tells their realities. It is for the people, by the people… There are now street artists who started by attending these community events… Street art also spread to other cities." Thanks to the growing public interest and trust, by 2018 these community art events were held in six cities (Aden, Ibb, Taiz, Sana'a, Ma'arib, and Hudaydah) that are located in various regions of Yemen and are controlled by separate political factions.[2] In addition, since 2017, the open art day event has been organized outside Yemen in different cities in France, UK, India, South Korea, Madagascar, and Italy simultaneously (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Picture from Murad Subay's Facebook account showing community participation in an *Open Day of Art* event, in Sana'a, Yemen, March 15, 2017. (Hani 2017)

Figure 6. Picture from Murad Subay's Facebook account showing community participation in an *Open Day of Art* event, in Seoul, South Korea, March 27, 2018. (Subay 2018)

Digital media technologies moreover have been instrumental in Murad Subay's training and the circulation of his art. Not only did he first learn street art techniques through the Internet but also, he has relied on social media to connect with people and organize art events locally and internationally. Digital affordances enable him to overcome travel restrictions, too. When, for instance, he could not travel to the UK due to the difficulties of Yemeni passport holders in obtaining a travel visa, he collaborated on Skype with a British artist to install his mural on the wall of the Imperial War Museum in the UK.[3] In another instance, his mural *Yemen Needs Peace* was projected on the building of the National Mall in Washington, DC in the USA.[4] Subay also shares images of his art across various digital platforms including his personal website, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. By spreading the digital images of his artworks, he extends their political statements from the streets of Sana'a to a wider national and international community, which in turn fosters visibility and media coverage.

Restoration of Loss Through Art

For artists living in zones of conflict, art becomes a medium that is "strongly connected to the collective nationalist imaginary and salient episodes of local history" (Slitine 2018, 51). In war and conflict zones of the Middle East, *smoking art*, which is based on the principle of transforming the smoke

released by bombings into certain representational figures, and emerged as a popular art form among young activist-artists in Palestine (Slitine 2018; El-Haddad 2014). By the same token, Yemen-based artist Saba Jallas transforms real images of the war into works of art that reflect her desire to symbolically restore her country, using merely her smartphone. Although as an artist in the war zone, she has to cope with the shortage of even basic drawing tools and has to rely on her friends outside Yemen to send the necessary equipment. Jallas (2017) defines her digital artwork as a contribution to restoring peace in Yemen. Inspired by the smiles and optimism of Yemeni people living under the threat of conflict, Jallas' work aims to keep the hope alive that one day the war will end and that Yemenis will be able to rebuild their country (Globe Backyard TV 2016). Motivated by the enthusiastic response from her compatriots, Jallas is also invested in art pedagogy by instructing those interested in drawing arts as well as community charity work by auctioning her work and contributing the proceeds to humanitarian projects such as repairing schools damaged by war, buying school supplies and shoes for children, or opening a bakery that provides free bread for the needy families (Jallas 2020). Thus, the virtual restoration that she enacts in her art also channels into actual concrete restoration.

Jallas superimposes images of Yemeni women, men, and children over pictures of smoke and explosions. In Jallas' art, smoke from military airstrikes is transformed into "beautiful" images. By placing side by side the original picture and the one she has drawn over it, Jallas invokes a contrast between the destructive nature of the war and the beauty of love, life, and hope. In her drawings, Jallas frequently uses traditional Yemeni costumes, decorations, and symbols to reclaim the national unity destroyed by war. She transforms smoke into imageries, for instance, of happy and peaceful people dancing or playing an instrument. Thus, she invites her audience to imagine the Yemeni people as they used to be and as they deserve to be (Figure 7). She expresses her intent in one of her posts on Facebook as follows: "Dance like you have never hurt... Like you have never been sad" (Jallas 2018).

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Figure 7. Selections from Saba Jallas' Smoking Art. (Jallas 2015–16)

Jallas also uses real-life images of those affected by war and artistically restores their wounds or reconstruct ruined spaces. *Covering* appears as the key trope of her work: covering the wounds of a young girl with traditional henna art, the demolished walls of a school with paint and decorations, or a bomb-shelled area with a heart-shaped Yemeni flag. Jallas posts her artistic works on her personal Facebook and Instagram accounts, accompanied by textual invocations such as: "What will separate us if the love of the home-land unites us?" (Jallas 2016). In effect, Jallas appropriates photojournalistic images of war, violence, and destruction and gives them a new life charged with beauty, love, belonging, and togetherness. In the "posthumous images" (Elias 2018) of her art, Jallas "resurrects" those individuals and communities that were wounded and destroyed and restores them the life that was taken away from them. Her art invites all of us to remember the potential futures of those whose lives were suddenly interrupted by war.

Figure 8. Selections from Saba Jallas' Art. (Jallas 2015–16)

Invocations of Yemen's Collective Spirit in Film

Pervasive violence and conflict in Yemen have also fostered the use of digital short films, mostly produced by a team of self-taught amateurs as another artistic medium to inform the world of the suffering and loss experienced by the people of Yemen. Young Yemeni film artists use both documentary and fictional forms. Some of these films are produced with modest financial and training support by international donors. In addition, often they rely on volunteer work by the locals, who, for instance, are given a camera to shoot a

remote location to which the filmmakers cannot access (Hashim 2017). The films are disseminated via social media platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter) and online streaming platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo. These filmmakers frequently produce their films with English subtitles as a strategy to appeal to the wider international community. Some of these artists work independently, while others work with international organizations or collectives, including the British Council, the BBC, and #SupportYemen. More advanced filmmakers such as Hashim Hamoud Hashim and Abdurahman Hussain also organize training workshops (often in collaboration with local NGOs in Yemen) to offer workshops and tutorials in different aspects of filmmaking such as graphic design, editing, and animation (Figure 9). Hashim places civic engagement at the core of his artistic work by casting ordinary people as actors, recruiting them to the production crew, providing them training and support (Hashim 2020). These efforts have become particularly valuable as it has been extremely difficult for Yemenis to go abroad for studying film (Hashim 2017).

Figure 9. Picture from a filmmaking workshop taught by Hashim Hamoud Hashim, organized by YWT, a Yemeni nonprofit organization dedicated to encouraging youth to create social change through art, culture, media, and technology. (YWT Org 2017)

Yemeni short films appeal to the audience's sense of outrage through shocking images of violence, despair, loss, destruction, and individual stories. Yemeni filmmakers, moreover, frequently resort to poetry as a tactical means due to its traditional popularity in Yemen as well as its power to move. Poetry has served as a socially embraced means of expressing not only "feelings of sorrow, joy, and concern" but also "conflict resolution and political discourse" (Adra 2004, 231). Making use of the circulatory efficacy and public reception of poetry (Miller 2005; Caton 1990; Caton, Aryani, and al-Eryani 2014), these films sow seeds of hope and resilience into the hearts of Yemenis who have experienced the harsh consequences of the conflict and violence firsthand. Yemeni filmmaker Abdurahman Hussain (2015) expresses this dual purpose as follows: "I have found in storytelling through film-making a reason to continue no matter how bad things can get knowing that art is what we need to make peace and spread love in people's heart." Through their films, these artists also make a statement against the disappearance of individual stories in the grand media narrative that covers only the military aspect of the war in Yemen. In what follows, I examine a sample of films by a number of directors to demonstrate the formal variety of the representations of the conflict.

Winner of the United Nation's Yemen Creativity Competition *Your Rights-Your Future*, Hashim Hamoud Hashim's short film *Blind Eyes* (2014) addresses the long-term problem of widespread violence and death in Yemen in a powerful poetic language and symbolism. An old woman, dressed in traditional Yemeni costume and symbolizing Yemen, narrates how a land once called "happy Arabian land and land of civilizations" has become a "land of grief and sorrow" as a result of conflict and violence (Figure 10). The film uses a palette of shades of black, white, and brown to convey a sense of gloom. The film condemns all forms of violence and use of arms, from primitive fights on battlegrounds using swords and spears to military attacks involving tanks and planes, and suicide bombings in the name of politics and religion. The old woman reminds her people of their beautiful tradition, in which shedding blood was once rejected and considered shameful. In the tone of a mother talking to her children, she asks: "Why do you insist on making me suffer?" She is also shown shedding tears of blood,

and concludes with the following appeal to Yemenis: "I am entirely tired of keeping wondering, who is the last victim?"

Figure 10: Screenshot taken by the author from Hamoud Hashim, Blind Eyes, 2014. (Hashim 2014)

In his other award-winning film I want My World as I see (2016), Hashim once again strives to reclaim Yemen's lost "colors and beauties." In the opening of the film, everything is black and white (Figure 11). A child inserts a tape into the recorder and the narrator starts describing his dream. Then, in a prophetic voice, the narrator informs the audience of the coming of the light. The camera zooms momentarily onto the beam of light breaking through branches of a tree. It then follows the dreamlike restoration of the land to its true order and vibrant colors and the population to their peaceful and happy times. Particularly striking are the black and white images of a young Yemeni man shooting at another with hatred and a close-up shot of a girl who is crying. Peace and happiness prevail over hate and sorrow as their images become suffused with color and their faces smiling. For Hashim, the energy of his films stems from depicting "the conditions of real people by real people and through real footage." He believes that this commitment to realism has found strongly positive support among the Yemenis, who embraced his films as "touching and speaking directly" to them. In his own words, the major goal of his films is "to create the spirit of responsibility for the citizens to rise and support each other" (Hashim 2020).

Figure 11: Screenshot taken by the author from Hamoud Hashim, *I Want My World as I See*, 2016. (Hashim 2016)

Produced as part of the #SupportYemen collective[5], Abdurahman Hussain's The Color of Injustice (2015b) features the Yemeni poet Jaafar Aman's poem Night for How Long. The poem depicts feelings of fear, grievance, and despair resulting from a devastating war, which resembles "a prison of insanity and revenge in a rock of fire." To draw attention to the visceral feelings of destruction, and the impact of the war on individuals, Hussain also superimposes photographic images of the devastation of the war on the bodies of Yemenis who demonstrate expressions of sorrow, fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and despair (Figure 12). Shot in black and white, the film ends with the following lines of hope from the poem: "This weakness will not last… and injustice will not… No matter how long it lasts."

Figure 12. Screenshot taken by the author from Abdurahman Hussain *The Color of Injustice*, 2015. (Hussain 2015b)

In his documentary short film, *A Broken Home* (2015a), Abdurahman Hussain addresses the issue of sectarianism, which has become another serious consequence of the war on the Yemeni nation. Narrated from the perspective of two Yemeni women (a researcher and a journalist), the film discusses how the civil war that started in 2015 has fueled divisions and sectarianism and has torn apart the diverse social fabric that was once a source of pride for the Yemenis. "A home country is not a place defined by geography, to me a home country is the people," says researcher Suha Bashren, as her car travels through the ruined streets of Yemen. Her voice-over continues to narrate the kindness and generosity of the Yemeni people she has met while working in various parts of the country, while the camera moves through the roads and streets to show the extreme level of physical destruction. Journalist Bushra Alamani tells the audience that she has lived her whole life not knowing her sect or religious group, despite having family members from various ideologies and backgrounds. Bashren is concerned that, although infrastructure can be rebuilt, it might not be possible to rebuild broken relationships. She warns her compatriots: "The crack is wide and it's getting wider every day… If we do not prevent the expansion of this crack, we will lose a home that was once called Yemen." Abdurahman Hussain and other creative artists, therefore, aim to bring the nation together through mourning the losses and injuries that Yemen and Yemenis had to go through. "This act of mourning is an invitation to all Yemenis to reflect on their shared social vulnerability and the possibility of exposure to violence" (Al-Eriani 2020, 237). Mourning loss invigorates hope for a new national unity. The remembrance that mourning enables paves the way for reclaiming national unity, overcoming political sectarianism, and envisioning new horizons for the country.

Another film highlighting the devastating impact of the war on Yemen is *Bara'ah* (Innocence). Made by Comra[6] students and financed by the #SupportYemen collective, *Bara'ah* focuses on the heavy toll that the war in Yemen took on children. It tells the tragic story of a young girl from Sana'a, who died as a result of third-degree burns over 90 percent of her body after a Saudi-led coalition's allegedly mistaken air raid that destroyed her neighborhood. The film starts with a voice-over of her singing with joy, which

is abruptly cut off by the sound of ambulance sirens and followed by real footage of a razed house in flames and smoke. The camera then surveys the interior of Bara'ah's house, completely destroyed and items once belonged to its residents scattered around in pieces. The camera zooms on a smashed scooter, once a favorite toy of Bara'ah (Figure 13). Footage from previous videos and accounts by her uncle reveals a curious and high achieving schoolgirl, full of joy and dreams. As the film shows her burial, the voice of her uncle reacts bitterly to the rumors that they may be offered compensation: "What good will their money do for us when we have lost the people we love?" The story of *Bara'ah* commands the attention of the spectators to the story of an innocent child at a time when mainstream media outlets depict conflict victims across the region as piles of bodies, with no names, lives, or future.

Figure 13. Screenshots taken by the author from *Bara'ah*, #SupportYemen, 2015. (Al-Yarisi 2015)

Finally, Mohamed Samy, a film director and founder of Aden Freerun, weaves the narrative of his documentary film *Rise* (2015) around the extreme sport parkour. Parkour is a form of anarchic free running that disturbs the order of public spaces. Parkour has emerged as a subversive act of re-imaging space (Saville 2008), overcoming urban obstacles and physical structures with athletic and artistic movements (Kidder 2013). Samy's documentary takes this element of global youth culture and uses it to narrate the extreme challenges faced by Yemenis in their daily lives as a result of the war and to convey their determination to reclaim the city. The documentary starts with real footage from the war, including images of destroyed buildings, and military tanks that have become part of the landscape, as well as images of ordinary Yemenis (Figure 14). The energy, dexterity, and determination of the athletes create a powerful contrast against the images of spaces and structures ravaged by war.

Figure 14: Screenshot taken by the author from Mohamed Samy, *Rise*, 2015. (Samy 2015)

Rise urges the audience to reflect on the meaning and psychological impact of practicing a sport defined as anarchic in spaces demolished by weapons and bombs. As one of the narrator athletes in the film states: "I want to send a message to you. Aden is a city that will never lose hope despite what we suffered and still do. We'll not lose hope. Maybe the thing we do could be just movement. However, we will send with our movement that Aden

and its people are still standing. And we'll rise again!" It must be noted, however, that the hope that Samy and other filmmakers invoke is "a form of hope that vests its power in the community," not in foreign intervention in the name of saving the Yemenis (Al-Eriani 2020, 236). Hope, in other words, lies in the Yemenis themselves who are ultimately the sole agents of claiming their country from the grips of war, violence, and conflict.

Conclusion

The war in Yemen has resulted in casualties, disruption of livelihoods, pervasive poverty, hunger, economic instability, psychological trauma, and the rise of hostility and divisions between communities. Individuals report that they are desperate and have lost all trust in the political elites involved in the conflict (Al-Dawsari 2016). Yet the international community has remained silent about this humanitarian drama. The little coverage made by mainstream media only offers news on the military aspects of the war, but almost nothing about the vanishing of the Yemenis themselves. This is the gap that the wartime generation of Yemeni artists aim to fill, deploying a set of artistic practices and strategies that they share with other artists who experience destruction in the Middle East and elsewhere. As recorders and archivers of the collective experience of ordinary civilians, they employ diverse forms, content, and techniques to intervene in the representation of the conflict through participatory media. Through their creative work, they not only expose the ills of the war but also promote social cohesion, resilience healing, and inspiration for hope for the future.

While technologies in the digital age offer these artists free space and easy routes for advocacy, they still need to navigate certain power dynamics. As Viola Shafik (2015, 234) notes, "neither the collective spirit, nor the space and opportunities offered by new media, can hide the fact of financial dependency and transnational embedding." Some of these artistic productions still depend on financial support from international donors (as in the case of the British Council's sponsorship of the #SupportYemen collective) to organize filmmaking workshops and produce advocacy films. Some depend on the help of family and friends to buy materials they need for their work and others engage in commercial and commissioned work to finance their

activities. Equally important, given the current meager supply of electricity and Internet connection due to the ongoing war, Yemen presents a stark case of the digital divide, of the systemic inequality of access to the Internet between rich and poor countries. Among 201 countries around the world, Yemen's Internet ranks 200th in terms of broadband speed (Cable 2020). In addition to extremely poor Internet connectivity, a battle between political groups over the control of Internet services, high Internet prices, sabotages to Internet infrastructure by militias and other groups, blocking access to social media, online censorship, and surveillance are some other challenges that Yemenis have to face (Coombs 2020).

Despite these drawbacks, however, Yemeni artist-activists convey critical and alternative content about the dire realities of Yemen. In the words of Lanfranco Aceti (2009, 23), the primary role of artists in places where identity and psychology are shaped by war experience is "to engage with the events as a witness of war, as a carrier of past, present and future possibilities, as a narrative decoder and reconstructor of the scars of war's destruction." Therefore, despite their considerable political and economic challenges, Yemeni artists of the digital age remain agents of hope, holding out the promise of socio-political change, as well as narrators and recorders of the physical and psychological suffering of a nation in a disordered land. They document the devastation of the conflict with affective intensity and depth that mainstream media cannot contest.

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Notes

[1] The term is borrowed from Egyptian artist with a pseudo name *Ganzeer* to refer to graffiti art's power to transform a space into a place outside of the control of political powers.

[2] Yet in 2019, the local authorities in the cities of Ibb, Ma'arib and Hudaydah were apparently threatened by the symbolic unity and solidarity that street art had fostered; and as a result, they did not allow the events to take place (Subay 2020).

[3] See Imperial War Museums (2019).

[4] See Subay (2019).

[5] The #SupportYemen collective, initially started during the 2011 uprisings as a twitter hashtag to disseminate tweets about the uprisings. It subsequently evolved into an independent media collective of filmmakers, bloggers, journalists and videographers, whose aim is to achieve social and political change in Yemen.

[6] Comra is an intensive two-week film-making camp to train young people in film making and storytelling. The project is led by the film makers and co-founders of #SupportYemen collective, Sara Ishaq and Abdurahman Hussain, who also provide the training.

Nurgul Oruc