Urban space and politics of the everyday:
Thinking through and with the image in contemporary Cairo

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Abstract

This thesis addresses the increasing eminence of the image within contemporary social theory to intervene into what Tarek Elhaik terms the “sensorial turn” in anthropology. I implement a method of thinking through and with the image that balances creative and critical modalities of engaging socially embedded images beyond a semiotic approach. My entryway into such discussions is seven Cairo films from 2010-2013 that allow us to complicate “pre-” and “post-” revolutionary imaginaries and expand how to see, listen to, and think the political everyday and changing notions of publicness within the city. In tandem with the generative strategies of visual refusal in Maha Maamoun’s 2026, this thesis calls for re-approaching the visual in Cairo through an urban spatial focus on the present everyday-lived. In moving to the films Al-baḥth ‘an madīnā, Karim, Cairography, Al-khurūg lil-nahār, Qaṣ, and Al-shuhub tudhakaranī bil-mutanassītīn, the thesis weaves deep descriptions of their images across various spatiotemporal contexts with distinct theoretical arguments relevant both to this period and the difficult horizon facing Cairo today. Through an embodied form of creative anthropological writing, I engage urban and visual culture scholars, as well as other social theorists, to perform the following: highlight long-standing and constitutive intersections of space and subjectivity otherwise to the global “imagining” of collective action in Tahrir; track how material spaces in the image open to ever-changing and contingent nodes of potentiality and violence in the politicized urban everyday; and read challenging liminalities of public and private space—at critical intersections of the aural and visual—within mundane images of eavesdropping. Ultimately, this project embraces a partiality of knowing that incorporates not only the particular contributions of this contemporary Cairo context but also a decolonial ethos from an urban global south perspective into emerging anthropologies of the image.
Prologue

The images of a film play before me as I sit in an outdoor screening venue in the Maadi neighbourhood of Cairo, the noise of the street outside often taking over the relatively quiet soundscape of this particular film. The same images then play before me while I re-watch this film as one of a large selection of contemporary Cairo films at the Arsenal archive in Berlin, which instead offers a soundproofed room where not a single sound can be missed. Back in Cairo, I continue to write about the film in question, Hala Lotfy’s Al-khurūg lil-nahār\(^1\) [Coming forth by day] (2012), as the various concerns underlying how we think about the meaning both embedded within but also surrounding such images proliferate—simultaneously enriching and confounding my ability to produce knowledge on the entangled social contexts of Cairo at the nexus of pre- and post-revolutionary imaginaries. It is curiously the qualities of interruption from my first screening that keep returning to me—the literal intrusion of the same city being presented on screen into my viewing of the film—and offer a reminder that there is no ideal atmosphere from which to definitively write on the life of images: to be pulled this or that way by the surrounding noise is certainly an undeniable part of the process, yet the question remained regarding how exactly to focus the methodological leanings of this project and frame the theoretical dynamics for my work in this context.

The following prologue provides a brief overview of how I developed the framework for this thesis project working mainly with a selection of seven alternative and experimental Cairo films released and exhibited between 2010 and 2013 within the method of thinking through and with the image. In introducing this method’s emergence from a recent trend of creative sensory engagement in anthropology, I note how it allows us to provide a more

\(^1\) Translation note: All Arabic film titles and quotations have been transliterated using Arabic romanization. The majority of English translations have been taken from the subtitles provided on the films themselves, and the author has provided all additional translations when subtitles were not available. The names of different people and places are written in their standard English spellings when relevant.
expansive and interactive form of working with images in a relatively post-disciplinary sense. I note, however, that my project attempts to intervene into such inquiries through a decolonial grounding that I trace to contemporary conversations within critical urban theory to ensure that my work properly resonates with the Cairo context in which it is situated. Finally, to set the stage for the type of critical-creative inquiry that I undergo in this project, I note how the writing style itself assumes an embodied quality while still remaining grounded in contemporary social theoretical literature. I hope to follow through on the ambitious efforts to expand our creative faculties as academics while nevertheless highlighting how these acts of further qualifying and situating such inquiries might ultimately open different possibilities for reading complex social contexts.

I - Thinking through and with the image

The methodology guiding this thesis is inspired by recent conversations among anthropologists who attended the 2015 Image as Method symposium organized by Brian Goldstone. I have mainly accessed this material through the conversations with Goldstone, Anand Pandian, Stuart McLean, and Robert Desjarlais compiled and published by Romero (2015). Despite working within different areas of the discipline, these scholars all nevertheless converge around a shared interest in creative methodologies involving the image: this both addresses the recent surge of scholarship engaging photographic and filmic images at the center of rather than as supplement to anthropological inquiry while also noting an understudied and longstanding history of thinking imagistically in the field. The latter is particularly traced back to the cinematic imagination that seemed to guide early anthropologists such as Malinowski, which Anand Pandian continues in his own work today: “cinema has helped me think, in other words, about anthropology’s stake in the world at
hand, and the various means that anthropology has at its disposal to convey this stake and its significance” (in Romero, 2015). Pandian’s work thus bridges anthropological and cinematic imaginations to promote a reading of South Indian socialities that “does not seek to distinguish reality from image, world from screen, the tangible from what is otherwise elusive” (Pandian, 2012, 127). In seeing cinema as a form of reading the everyday-lived world that is in some ways more reflective of the complex, contradictory, and affective ways in which life is lived by the subjects of anthropological study, Pandian highlights imagistic and sensory forms of thought in order to push for more experimental forms of creative expression and contemplation in lieu of definitive claims of epistemic authority through the standard methods of social scientific analysis.

What this method first highlights, then, is that the realm of the image need not be separated from the realm of the everyday-lived that characterizes anthropology’s longstanding interest in ethnographic inquiries. Scholars such as Pandian and McLean, who recently collaborated on the collection *Crumbled Paper Boat* (2017), are instead calling that we challenge a set definition of what ethnography is and engage a larger sensory realm of lived experiences through innovative methodologies such as thinking through and with the image. Their work connects to a larger “sensorial turn” (see Elhaik, 2016) both in relation to the image, such as the work of Harvard’s sensory ethnography lab, and within anthropological study more broadly (e.g., Biehl and Locke, 2017). This not only allows us to engage a more creative process in how we write about images, bringing out an “ability to reveal possible worlds lodged within the apparent banality of the actual” (Pandian and McLean, 2017, 5), but also allows us to cross disciplinary bounds in terms of the scholarly conversations in which we can intervene. As anthropologist Robert Desjarlais notes, “I think people are now trying to get at those uncertain, inchoate modes of images, rather than just analyzing them in a semiotic way. People are realizing that the semiotics of images are often
very unclear and quite murky‖ (in Romero, 2015). The operative gesture here is not that a
semiotic approach is being replaced but rather that the method of thinking through and with
the image allows us to expand how we read images as embedded within everyday-lived social
contexts and frame their theoretical impact in renewed ways. In the gesture of thinking
“through,” we remain attached to the particular forms of expression and sensory engagement
that the image itself provides, but in also thinking “with” the image, we recognize that the
image is embedded in a particular social context intersected by other imaginaries which
complicate and expand our readings beyond set disciplinary or analytical bounds.

In sum, we might say that the method of thinking through and with the image as
proposed by these scholars is an attempt to bring about ways of thinking everyday-lived
social contexts “otherwise” to previous discursive frameworks—or what Restrepo and
Escobar (2007) refer to as “anthropology otherwise.” In critiquing the inherent coloniality of
anthropological discourse as perpetuating a Western point of view and epistemological
grounding, they call for us to think through other possibilities of reading social contexts
across the global south that are not based on epistemically violent conceptions of otherness
and cultural difference (Restrepo and Escobar, 2007, 100-1). This allows us to highlight how
normative discursive modes of anthropological inquiry are dominated by a larger imaginary
that needs to be expanded upon in multiple ways, paying attention to the “diverse local
histories” (Mignolo, 2000, 64) and different ways of thinking lived experience that cannot be
adequately accounted for in the discipline’s current frameworks. Thinking the otherwise,
then, is about embracing the complex and contradictory relations of the everyday-lived social
that have been made invisible in the binary frameworks which have historically guided
academic inquiries (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, 113).

The innovative and creative methods of thinking through and with the image that I
have outlined above thus embody an express interest in actually re-imagining the underlying
ways of seeing, sensing, and thinking social contexts of the global south. The term “underlying” is important here because it recognizes that we are not necessarily producing new dynamics which encompass previous ones but rather returning to understudied, less immediately visible and legible aspects of the social context in which each of our works is embedded. For many anthropologists who work with the image, this has meant moving further away from providing critiques of disciplinary power structures and instead trying to engage modalities of the otherwise that would allow us to read the social from these underlying perspectives.

The question remains, however, as to how we might continue such creative inquiries through and with the image while more strongly maintaining the critical grounding of the decolonial scholarship that I have called on to contextualize this method. Stuart McLean (2009), for instance, argues that our creative academic efforts should “overcome a long-standing preoccupation with questions of epistemology” (234), but the very decolonial work that provides depth to this methodological framing would actually call for us to place such questions at the forefront of our academic inquiries. I have therefore chosen to more fundamentally consider the contributions of a decolonial epistemic framing to ground my intervention into thinking through and with the image through a critical framework that allows me to re-approach questions of the sensory and the otherwise in a renewed manner. In taking this journey throughout this thesis, I aim to ultimately frame how my project might respond to a creative anthropological mindset by further situating and qualifying the manner in which such inquiries into the image are conducted.

II - Re-framing the image through the epistemic
My inquiry in relation to contemporary Cairo film—while sharing the methodology of thinking through and with the image—instead attempts to engage images in a manner that pays greater attention to the coloniality of knowledge production. This calls on us to ask questions not only in terms of how we conduct this method but what the underlying stakes of such an intellectual inquiry might reveal in the context of the geopolitical production of knowledges. My work is thus deeply inspired by decolonial framing around epistemologies that seeks to engage the multiple and plural forms of knowledges embedded within various spatiotemporal contexts of colonial difference, and which are often violently shrouded by the dominant episteme of modernist, capitalist, and colonialist structures (see Grosfoguel, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2011; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). By following this theoretical thread to interdisciplinary scholars of film and anthropology such as Freya Schiwy (2009), whose work on indigenous video assumes an epistemic framing that challenges the coloniality of knowledge production regarding indigeneity in Bolivia, I borrow her commitment to work with film and video “as an interlocutor” in “contributing to thinking differently” (2009, 25) about particular everyday-lived social contexts.

While similar inquiries into the epistemic potential of film in global south contexts exist, they have generally remained quite scattered in their disciplinary and methodological groundings. Brian Larkin’s (2008) anthropological analysis of media infrastructures in urban Nigeria, for instance, provides an important critique to a universalist perspective on film history—“a different genealogy for the emergence of cinema, one that examines cinematic exchange as governed not by commodity but political relations” (2008, 12). In using situated contexts of coloniality to alter and expand our epistemic framings on film, he asks us to reconfigure our infrastructural reading of cinema in a manner that does not privilege a singular history across temporal periods largely tracking cinema of the global north.
Meanwhile, more recent work within cinema studies such as Mntambo’s (2017) may not engage in the infrastructural forms of anthropological analysis that characterize Larkin’s methodology but nevertheless finds expansive ways to provide situated readings of films in an epistemic register. Mntambo engages Maharaj’s (2009) contemporary arts framework of “thinking through the visual,” which focuses on art as knowledge production. In questioning the foundational conceptions of knowledge production as promoting exclusionary notions of reason and rationality, Maharaj sees visual art as a productive entryway into questioning how knowledge is produced otherwise to this exclusionary model (2009, 3). As such, Mntambo uses the urban spatial context of Johannesburg to read films through the concept of “epistemic inversion,” addressing how alternative uses of cinematic techniques and disruptive narrative forms challenge how we approach urban subjectivity and larger questions of decoloniality (2017, 223).

In tracking this question of the epistemic, then, I discovered that there is no straightforward genealogy from which to work: these scholars have worked from relatively divergent histories in pulling together scholarship across cinema studies, visual culture, anthropology, and social theory more broadly. While I certainly remain committed to this type of interdisciplinary exploration, I was also, however, quite interested in how the spatial turn around situated contexts of the urban connects Larkin’s anthropological reading of film and media with Mntambo’s close analysis of the filmic form, particularly in terms of how the former more fundamentally engages an embedded social context through which we think “with” films whereas the latter provides direct readings that think “through” them. Moreover, I then discovered recent works within critical urban theory (Abourahme, 2014; Garcia, 2017) that provide readings of films to highlight how working with their sensorial strategies can challenge our current capabilities for thinking about complex social, spatiotemporal, and political contexts.
In noting how these different inquiries bring together the method of thinking through and with images within a critical grounding around the urban, I found renewed framing for my work. This turn to the urban global south opens up this exploration to the urban’s long history as a generative site of political and epistemic intervention (see Brenner and Schmid, 2015): as far back as the work of sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991), there has always been interest in how the urban serves as a dynamic and flexible form of social theoretical analysis through which we can alter our readings of the social and think beyond discursive sociocultural categories—or in other words, understand how life is lived otherwise to them.

As shown in Abourahme’s (2014) recent intervention, how we use the image to alter our sensory reading of the urban can at the same time pose significant critical challenges to the political imaginaries which have often guided our readings of the social. In his conversation on the documentary *Future Suspended*, which considers the effects of modernist development and neoliberal capital on everyday Athens, he especially notes how the film’s sensorial strategies ask us to re-think the political alternatively to the nostalgia of postcolonial and socialist futures:

Maybe the trouble we have in finding political form beyond both the expired vanguardist party and the false-coming of the rhizomatic crowd has something to do with our attachments to an urban life slowly but surely passing. An urban life of stable public/private distinctions, of spaces of appearance and association; an urban life still foundational to the incomplete demands of citizenship and centrality. (2014, 580)

He argues that *Future Suspended* instead allows for sensory re-engagement with the political potentials of the present, confronting the lack of stable forms on which to draw together collective political imaginaries and instead calling on us to differently see and sense the contradictions and complexities of the present everyday. Here we might re-approach how life is lived otherwise to the discursive structures of colonial-capitalist modernity as already embedded within the everyday social fabrics of the urban present.
This context ultimately emerged as the most fitting for my decision to situate the scope of this project around the contemporary Cairo context, particularly in re-thinking the underlying political framing regarding how we approach our readings of Cairo’s diverse social spaces. Both within and beyond scholarship of Cairo proper, one image continues to define political possibility and the otherwise: that of iconographic street protest during the 2011 political revolts. I instead ask how we might seek to reframe our epistemic approach to the image and shift our focus towards the complexities of the everyday social in Cairo. Despite how popular imaginaries of Cairo have been dominated by this focus on revolution and street protest—acts which in the Mubarak era began as early as the 2005 Kefaya movement and have continued up to the recent events of September 2019—how might we reconsider the epistemic and political implications of how filmmakers during this time period have continued to turn away from such immediately visible forms of political expression to instead focus on a wider array of everyday-lived spaces across the city?

Here I am able to return to the decolonial groundings on which my inquiry was first based—Mignolo’s provocation that “the most radical struggles in the twenty-first century will take place on the battlefield of knowledge and reasoning” (2009, 101)—and acknowledge that the first step towards addressing this framing around contemporary Cairo is not to necessarily redefine the political but re-engage more fundamental questions about how we approach it. This calls on us to think, see, listen to, and sense these particular social contexts in ways that are further situated within different everyday-lived spaces across the city. In placing the methodology of thinking through and with the image within a critical urban theoretical grounding, I aim to show how renewed engagement with filmic images can be a simultaneously critical and creative means to open different possibilities regarding what constitutes the political and how that affects our larger readings of the contemporary social.
As I move into the introductory chapter to this thesis, I begin to more formally build out the framework guiding this thesis in co-existence with the contributions brought by the images with which I work. Before doing so, however, I want to close this prologue with a note about the particular style of anthropological writing in which I present my work and how this is itself a form of embodiment through which I can actualize the type of critical-creative inquiries I wish to promote.

III - Writing on the edges of creative anthropology

What perhaps most draws scholars such as Pandian and McLean to the image is that it allows them to confront an excess of sensory engagement without having to discipline or categorize it. They argue that this form of sensory immersion, which is usually lost in the rules and structures of academic discourse, should actually be embodied and performed in our writings: “writing thus becomes a means of marking and maintaining an openness to events, surprises, and contingencies, to a reality that is as much a source of questions and provocations as of answers” (2017, 4). We see this in Pandian’s (2012) own work quite clearly, wherein he embeds his reader in imagistic and affective landscapes through a sense of storytelling that is not bound to any specific genealogy or set of structured academic conversations. The image and the writing themselves are the mediums of expression that offer the intellectual and academic challenges provided by his work.

I have attempted, particularly in my descriptions of the images with which I work, to contribute to such trends of academic writing. I share Pandian and McLean’s note that these endeavours “may not work for everyone,” offering instead that questions the reader has which are left unanswered, or pathways left unfollowed, “may carry a generative spark, provoking further explorations of the creative and transformative potentials of
anthropological writing” (2017, 8). In my attempts to provide detailed descriptions of images that engage their sensory excesses, which is how I begin most sections of my chapters, I aim for these images to in one sense stand on their own while at the same time deeply resonate with the analyses and inquiries built around them. The images should always speak to the dynamics which I then unravel in each chapter, but I also encourage my readers to pose their own questions and think through alternative pathways that may emerge from the excesses of these descriptions.

At the same time, I believe that the particular ways in which I have adapted this embodied writing style for the robust and theoretical work demanded of this thesis project allows me to qualify how the openness that can be read onto these images must at the same time confront the complex social contexts in which this work is embedded. I do not necessarily offer such creative work on an open plane of expression—what McLean refers to as an “openness to new and emergent realities….irreducible to the parameters of human knowledge production” (2009, 234). Rather, I relate my work with images to readings of the social that have emerged in particular areas of anthropological and social theoretical discourse, and which resonate with this project’s underlying decolonial ethos regarding the geopolitical production of knowledges.

To balance among such perspectives through the writing process itself aids me in my aim to challenge how the boundaries between film/the image and anthropological inquiry are variously built, transcended, and placed in critical counterpoint. I hope most of all that my deep attachments to the work come through in the chapters that follow, as the process of writing this thesis has been an instrumental experience in pushing my abilities to read the world and think about my position in it as an academic. Film has long been a critical source of inspiration for me in terms of how I might confront previous assumptions and bring seemingly dichotomous concepts into conversation, yet I am particularly focused on taking
this longstanding personal relationship to the medium and further challenging this position through the various frameworks that come together in this work.

Ultimately, I have attempted to convey the eminence of the images with which I work in their guiding of the writing process and the structure of my inquiry. This ensures that I am best able to pay respect to the simultaneous critical and creative powers of thinking through and with images. As my opening reading of Maha Maamoun’s 2026 (2010) goes on to demonstrate, this work is creative not in order to overcome the difficulties and constraints of reading contemporary Cairo but to actually show how these difficulties and constraints—when re-framed—can be their own generative sources of strengthening our academic inquiries. Each chapter then builds from the previous in a manner that follows through on a robust line of argumentation that is always connected in its concern over how to balance the competing methodological and theoretical concerns that I have only begun to highlight in this prologue.
Chapter I – Re-approaching the visual in contemporary Cairo

From the silence of a blank, black screen, a man’s voice emerges:

“All enchanting night, the sky is clear, stars are shining” [“laylah sāhirah…al-samā’
šāfi‘ah…wa-tubrūq fīhā al-nugūm”] (Maamoun, 2010).

The words anticipate a particular aesthetic experience that never arrives—first disrupted here
by the presence of the blank screen on which we continue to pause. While held only for a
matter of seconds, this pause nevertheless anticipates the multiple refusals stitched
throughout Maha Maamoun’s 2026 (2010), wherein what we as viewers hear is never seen.
This man spends the entirety of the short film describing a vision of a future, dystopic Cairo
in the year 2026—which Maamoun has borrowed from a passage in Mahmoud Othman’s
political science-fiction novel Thawrat 2053: al-bidayah [The revolution of 2053: The
beginning] (2007)—yet each scene opens to the expectation of a visual experience that never
arrives.

The pause, the blankness of the screen, and this overall sense of visual disconnect do
not, though, merely trouble and halt the sensory process of viewing the film. Rather, as I turn
in this introductory chapter, they open up to significant questions through which we might
consider particular pathways for building from its disruptiveness: Why might the film hesitate
to visualize, and what is it that needs to be hesitated over? What does refusal, as a particular
practice of the visual, generate in this specific context? And where, ultimately, do we turn
when sound and image, the compatibilities embedded within our expected sensual order, do
not line up?

A second later in the film, the blank screen gives way. In a dark building, a man lies
in a netted hammock—two walls stand on either side of him with a small pathway in the
middle. White material, with wires running up to it, covers his eyes. We still do not see the images he continues to describe:

“And the moon is full. It is so big, it looks like it will touch the ground” [“wa-al-amar bada’ yanawwar. min kubr ḥagamuh, shaklüh ka’ınuh hayīlmis al-arḍ”] (Maamoun, 2010).

Nevertheless, a significant amount of context is opened up in this moment: here 2026 has recreated images from a seminal work of the French New Wave, Chris Marker’s La jetée (1962), which sees its protagonist undergoing experiments into time with this same material over his eyes.

Yet what is perhaps most curious about 2026 is how relatively confined its spatiotemporal and visual focus is as compared to the influences from which its creative practices grows. Just as the film’s narrative never engages additional material from Othman’s novel—which covers decades of events and leads to an imagined political revolution in the year 2053—the imagery of the film remains quite stagnant in only offering repeated shots of this man sitting in an abandoned building in the present, broken only by the intermittent return of the blank screen. This differs quite severely from La jetée, which more openly visualizes every step of its fantastical narrative using the backdrop of Paris’ destruction in a fictional World War III for a dive into past, present, and future. As my reading of 2026’s opening scene anticipates, however, I wonder what further excesses are imbricated within these visual and spatiotemporal confines in speaking to its particular social and political context.

I am therefore most interested in how we might think through and with the images of 2026—in its continual re-emergence from and to blankness—to reframe our spatiotemporal approach to the visual in relation to a more expansive reading of the social and political conditions of contemporary Cairo. In particular, I track how 2026’s resonance with specific questions of space in an urban theoretical sense connects to larger challenges regarding
temporality in the image that have yet to be formally applied to the study of film and visual culture in this manner. Moreover, I show how this work calls for a move away from a political focus on the 2011 revolution, which continues to dominate social theoretical interest in Cairo, and towards the political potentials of the present everyday in a reimagining of the “post-revolutionary” period. Lastly, I return to the visual refusals of 2026 to set the particular critical methodological directions that I engage throughout this thesis in conversation with scholars of visual culture.

2026 thus serves as a starting point for a number of questions that are carried throughout this thesis project as it explores a different manner through which we might re-approach the visual in contemporary Cairo and respond with renewed vigour to emerging theoretical questions. While these questions ultimately reach beyond the deliberately gestural mode in which 2026 operates, this film is nevertheless remarkably generative for rethinking how the divisions between the realm of filmic images and that of anthropology and social theory might be reconciled. In other words, 2026 offers a unique position from which to reorient the theoretical and political implications of visualizing Cairo in the contemporary: it emerges not from but through blankness as a particular form of opening our sensibilities, and in turn our spatiotemporal and political attentions, to present underexamined perspectives on the city at less immediately visible registers.

I – Urban space and visual refusal

From a close shot of the man’s partially covered face, leaned back with his mouth open, 2026 cuts to an image pulled slightly further out, his face now turned the other way and his hand lightly gripping the netting of the hammock.
“Around the pyramids, there is nothing but green expanses…immaculately designed”
[“ḥawālayn al-ahramāt min kul nāḥiyah māfish ghayr musaṭṭaḥāt khaḍrā…wa-munassiqah bardū biʾanāyah shadīdah”].

He gulps and exhales heavily—perhaps from thirst, perhaps from exhaustion. The next shot pulls slightly closer as he looks upwards, his arm bent to rest on the back of his head.

“I don’t see any buildings around the place. There’s no trace of any informal settlements”
[“mish shāyf āy mabānī ḥawālayn al-makān. kul al-‘ashwāʾiyat mālhāsh athar”].

He pants again as the transition to the next image mimics a sense of zooming in, his mouth now agape.

“Like they’ve been wiped out of existence” [“kaʾinuh tam maṣḥahā min al-wugūd”].

With his exhausted exhale, the screen turns to black (Maamoun, 2010).

This is not unfamiliar imagery—modernist desire, cosmopolitan aesthetics, the coloniality of a city by a city. Elsewhere, he describes surveillance towers scattered throughout the area, giant screens on walls that project natural imagery, banquet halls filled with elaborate buffet tables, the opulence of the Grand Egyptian Museum with gardens surrounding it, and the crumbling old city just blocked from view. All of these images, though, curiously call on a dystopic future that is experienced in one specific area of Cairo: Giza, a space that is popularly imagined as isolated from the rest of the city given the iconography of the necropolis housing the Great Pyramids and Great Sphinx. What 2026 immediately reminds us is that this imaginary is only made possible through the violence of erasing the lived urban environment in which it is immersed, which curiously resonates with many of the current projects of urban modernization and their underlying colonialist agendas (see Schwarz and Streule, 2017).

This resonance with current urban contexts, then, is only further emphasized through the visual of this one man lying with his eyes covered in an abandoned building in the present
day, altogether upending our attempt to read the film merely through its future dystopic conceit. That the film actually refuses to visualize this version of the future calls on what Abourahme has recently named “a science fiction of the present….That is, a science fiction of the only temporal register left to us—our stalled, perpetual present” (2014, 578; original emphasis). Here he notes a temporal disruption between the limits on our social theoretical abilities to imagine different political futures and the possibilities for re-approaching present conditions of how life is being lived under increasingly violent circumstances—a temporal disruption which he especially reads through the spatial framing of the urban.

I thus turn my attentions to this particular spatiotemporal disruption around present urban conditions in thinking through and with the images of 2026. In Abourahme’s turn to the film *Future Suspended*, which we might connect with other recent turns to film in an urban context (Garcia, 2017; Mntambo, 2017), we see how urban theory is becoming an increasingly generative site for exploring renewed sensory engagements within our readings of complex social contexts. This calls on how the urban has long been a productive site of political and epistemic intervention into altering our readings of the social to think beyond discursive sociocultural categories and understanding how life is lived otherwise to them (see Brenner and Schmid, 2015). Though urban theory is overall guided by ethnographic study of everyday-lived contexts of urbanity, I am interested in how my turn to 2026 in the larger context of this thesis project—including its particular approach towards thinking through and with the image—might allow me to bridge the above interventions. By further emphasizing the interdisciplinary grounding that can be unearthed through the urban as my main category of analysis, I attempt to bring together different disciplinary traditions and more formally think through a renewed urban spatial turn in our readings of the visual and the image.

Recent studies on space in the cinema field (Zhang, 2010; Jaikumar, 2019) have actually already started to ask renewed questions that set them apart from previous
interventions built around postmodern frameworks (e.g., Jameson, 1995). Key to developing such distinctiveness is their engagement with social theorists such as Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Doreen Massey (2005), who have both fundamentally changed how we approach intersections of the material/discursive and the spatial/temporal within our readings of the social. Given, then, Lefebvre and Massey’s eminence within urban theory, I attempt to continue Zhang and Jaikumar’s discussions—with particular attention to Massey’s spatial critique—to think through and with the images of contemporary Cairo film. Moreover, I do so in a manner that is more fully immersed within the current social theoretical conversations that resonate with the particular challenges of this political context.

In *The production of space*, Henri Lefebvre (1991) offers an important distinction between his reading of space via production and that of Marx and Engels: in overly emphasizing work in their conception of space, they thereby reify the “same 'concrete universal' which Marx described on the basis of Hegel's thinking” (72). Lefebvre then argues that, in also maintaining a sense of separation between the discursive and the material on which the Hegelian universal operates, much scholarship on space has failed to highlight the social relationships deeply embedded within spaces. He rather unravels a relational conception of social space based on the dynamic co-existence of its ideological production with the specific materialities and subjectivities that themselves produce spaces. This ultimately demands an attention to renewed questions that reformulate and revitalize our scholarly focus on the specific historical and geopolitical conditions of spaces produced otherwise to disciplinary structures.

This perspective on space understandably led Lefebvre to be quite critical of cinema as an audiovisual form that often reifies the representational and the abstract-virtual, which is an antagonism Jaikumar works to upend in her turn to the historical production of filmed spaces in India (2019, 7). In the context of 2026, we might also consider how its refusal to
visualize the future Giza of Othman’s prose, which in many ways embodies the discursive reading of space which Lefebvre wishes to complicate and trouble, also allows us to upend the limited potentials Lefebvre originally saw in the form. 2026, despite a conceit that is fundamentally virtual via its nod to time travelling, instead never moves beyond the material spatial confines of the Giza area. In so doing, the film does not exactly sit around to watch Giza’s destruction so much as unfold it through fragments of a complex spatiotemporal process of accumulation by dispossession that does not necessarily need to be shown to be seen, thereby calling on us to engage the visual otherwise to its abstract-virtual registers.

Space is a domain of simultaneous openings and closings in 2026, one that maintains a particular material focus as it unfolds differing dynamics of mobility. For instance, when describing an elaborate dining hall in 2026—the shot held at its closest on his upturned face and open mouth as he appears to turn—the man gulps, sniffs, and exhales: “I’ll try to…to get closer” [“ḥaḥāwal inī…a- aqarrab shwaya”]. Here there is physical exertion and struggle taken to move even a few steps within the hall where he stands, not as participant but a forced voyeur without a clear viewpoint: “I can’t recognize a lot of types…” [“mish qādir aṣnāf anwā’ā kathīr, bas…”] (Maamoun, 2010).

This points to a different reading of urban spaces of capitalist-modernity, heard but not seen from the perspective of someone who may not be included in the dinner but who nevertheless provokes these systems of inclusion and exclusion in his bearing witness.

2026 further emphasizes such scrutiny towards disciplinary imaginaries in its presentation of the means of virtuality—particularly the large screens set up within the necropolis—as closing rather than opening possibilities. Here, “natural” images are presented that reflect the aesthetic desires of a modern city at odds with the actual, quite arid landscape—and thus with the historicity of this space that the city is nonetheless constantly
attempting to sell. Where, then, are we to turn when the means of expression to which the camera has been put to use are presented as almost entirely unreliable?

2026’s traversal of Giza instead turns our visual attentions back to the present, to the abandon and ruin of the room where the man sits. In other words, 2026 emphasizes how everything in the film, and most especially its virtual journey to the future, occurs and converges through this space via the mundanity of the present everyday. Our reactions towards the unseen images of this dystopia are constantly shaped and intersected by the material textures of the man’s face and arms, the white eye covers with their drooping wires, the net of the hammock which carries his body, and the concrete walls and floors of the room which he occupies. The very mundanity of what is presented to viewers in this small, relatively closed-off space, is the point from which we can never fully depart.

I argue that this critical spatiotemporal intersection within the film points us closer to Doreen Massey’s proposal of “space as the dimension of multiple trajectories, a simultaneity of stories so-far. Space as the dimension of a multiplicity of durations” (2005, 24). Here the spatial politics of the visual are uprooted, resulting in a challenging and perhaps frustrating viewing experience that in its refusal to present expected forms of sensory engagement instead asks the more difficult question of how to open up to otherwise forms of sensing from—rather than transcending “beyond”—this seemingly constricted visual standpoint. How do we nevertheless create renewed ways of thinking this complex urban context given the limited visual materials with which we are presented?

As response, we might note how Massey similarly asks us to confront what at first appears most constraining about space as a theoretical concept: its assumed relationship to the fixation of meaning due to its historical placement within the realm of representation. She therefore critiques the privileging of temporality in Bergson’s work on movement and
duration, as well as its influence on scholars such as Deleuze, in connecting this to a long-standing theoretical tradition of placing space as subordinate to time. For my focus on the visual, I think it is particularly useful to ruminate on how she relates this concern to her larger contestation of Deleuze and Guattari’s anti-representational framework:

For if scientific/intellectual activity is indeed to be understood as an active and productive engagement in/of the world it is none the less...hard to deny (to absolve ourselves from the responsibility for?) any element of representation (see also Latour, 1999b; Stengers, 1997), even if it is, quite certainly, productive and experimental rather than simply mimetic, and an embodied knowledge rather than a mediation. (Massey, 2005, 29)

Specifically, I wonder how 2026’s scrutiny of the virtual emerges from an affinitive hesitance over being able to fully deny or absolve responsibility for how its acts of visualization leak into the representational: that the visual might merely recast the same phenomena it intends to place for critique, and that the position of freedom via the transcendence of corporeality in the time travelling experiment is actually one of suffocation and a lack of mobility in 2026. This latter point resonates with Musser’s (2012) critique of Deleuzian affect as assuming an almost totality of freedom in positions of de-subjectivity that actually reifies the dehumanization differentially experienced in regards to race. Where might readings of the visual that more centrally attempt to balance such complexities—a “dynamic simultaneity” of space and time (Massey, 2005, 23)—differently take us? It may be helpful to first spend more time thinking through how these frameworks built more formally around the temporal that Massey seeks to trouble intersect into our reading of 2026.

For Gilles Deleuze (1989), temporality within the cinematic form—or what he refers to as the time-image—produces significant potentials for thought that are not bounded by linearity, nor the distinctions between the real and the imaginary, and which ultimately embraces the illusory and contradictory manner in which everyday life is experienced. In some ways complementary to the visual approach in 2026, Deleuze acknowledges that the
time-image has a simultaneously productive and destructive power, wherein the growing indeterminacies of temporality marks a “state of permanent crisis” (1989, 112): the assumed spatiotemporal coordinates and sociocultural categories that have long guided our readings of the social are upended, and we are left instead to think within the constantly mobile and changing tides of the social.

This perspective on thinking with the time-image both resonates with 2026 while also allowing us to highlight further tensions within its approach to time—what the filmmaker herself refers to as “a vision that strains to reach beyond, yet remains severely confined by the present’s imaginal constraints” (Maamoun, 2010). In building on a particular visual-temporal conceit from La jetée, 2026 enters a relatively open field of thought wherein—as we have seen with Deleuze—the distinctions between the future, past, and present, as well as the virtual and the actual, become increasingly harder to discern. At the same time, however, 2026 filters such indeterminacies through its situated spatial and political context, which emerges again through its acts of visual refusal: the film refuses to open to the creative potentials of time as they have been previously envisioned, instead engaging them in a lateral manner that calls on us to re-approach how we think through and with its images. In the following section, I use 2026’s relationship with La jetée to show how the former’s divergence from a largely temporal framework also demands that we develop renewed groundings through which we approach the underlying political context of thinking through and with images of contemporary Cairo.

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2 This quote is taken from the description of the Vimeo entry for 2026, which can be accessed here: https://vimeo.com/16967688
II – Temporality and the political

Time is undeniably the guiding concept driving *La jetée*, which early on sees its protagonist meet “a man without passion who explained calmly that the human race was doomed, that Space was off-limits, that the only hope for survival lay in Time” (Marker, 1962). *La jetée*’s relatively open visual landscape is then guided by a particular narrative arc built around questions of temporality: beginning with images of the titular jetty way etched into the main character’s childhood memories, the film goes through an imagined destruction of Paris to bring us to the underground structures where this same man undergoes experiments into “Time.” Here we as viewers accompany him through almost everything he sees: a mix of real and imaginary images of his past, including a newly constructed relationship with the woman he saw as a child on the jetty way, and abstracted images of the future in the form of a recreated version of Paris, a new planet, and ethereal figures who give him the power to rejuvenate human life. While offered to return to this disembodied environment of the abstracted future, he instead decides to be sent back to his memory on the jetty way, where he as a child actually witnesses his own death.

We see here a simultaneous mixture of the productive and destructive powers of temporality, as the time experiments both offer forms of reimagining life and forebode the constant underlying presence of death in this man’s obsession with an image of the past. This perspective on the image relates strongly to the work of Henri Bergson (2004), who—similar to Lefebvre—was so critical of representational forms of thinking time and space that he also rejected the cinematic form as unable to deal with the complex multiplicities of temporality (in Deleuze, 1986, 1-3). Deleuze, however, also seeks to upend this antagonism in showing how Bergson’s conceptions of multiplicity, duration, and the simultaneities of temporalities are embodied in the cinematic form. For Deleuze, such gestures speak to a more dynamic reading of the world wherein the past is no longer a set concept that we call back to but is
always in co-existence with the present and the future, producing the mobile and
indeterminate grounding through which we read the social. He marks that more complicated
understandings of experiences are revealed through “the disturbances of memory and the
failure of recognition” (Deleuze, 1989, 55)—offering instead processes of becoming, of
crafting presents which continually emerge with a singularity that may not have been there
before but drastically change how we might look back or forward.

Though there are significant affinities with how Bergson and Deleuze read the social
through multiplicity and the rejection of stable social categories, there are nevertheless
underlying issues with how such turns built more largely around the temporal disregard the
co-dynamism of space in how we think through and with the image. This in turn leads to the
risk of an unacknowledged privileging of virtual spaces over the actual. In Deleuze’s
conception of the any-space-whatever, for instance, he momentarily splits the spatiotemporal
to show how “space itself has left behind its own co-ordinates and its metric relations” to
move to “a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible” (1989, 109).
What Massey’s critique thus allows us to ask here is why time opens to multiplicities of
temporalities as both dynamic in their own right and in relation to one another while space is
either statically reduced to its quantitative properties or given a virtual singularity that
ultimately refuses the dynamism of specific everyday-lived spatialities?

For an example of the latter, take how *La jetée* ultimately reconstructs a memory not
“of specific events nor that of a specific subject” but “a transhistorical memory” (Ffrench,
2005, 37), bringing together diverse material spatial contexts through the virtuality of its
future imaginary. More specifically, *La jetée’s* depictions of a destructed Paris and its
underground tunnels respectively connect us to Hiroshima in the aftermath of its bombing
and the structure of Nazi concentration camps, while the film also constructs the image of its
protagonist’s death in likeness to Spanish loyalist Federico Borrell Garcia (Ffrench, 2005,
36). In attempting to harness creative faculties beyond such material spatial and corporeal bounds as a particular form of ruminating on the trauma of WWII, does La jetée not elide how the virtual and actual meet differentially throughout the film? More specifically, is not the lived trauma that it is attempting to build from a distinctly European one, and thus is there not already going to be a greater step towards the representational—and thus a larger responsibility, to refer back to Massey (2005, 29)—when borrowing from the violence and destruction of Hiroshima? These are questions that are largely left underexplored in La jetée, and I instead use 2026 to bring dynamic readings of temporality to the urban theoretical context guiding this thesis.

Massey shows how a renewed focus on space in dynamic relation to time demands a different political grounding, one that rethinks space, time, and subjectivity through geographies of interrelatedness (2005, 10). For the context of this thesis, we might relate this to Ash Amin’s (2013) larger provocation on the contemporary urban condition: in posing not distinct sets of lived experience nor the total convergence of collective subjects but a complex web of what Massey terms “throwntogetherness” (2005, 140). Amin argues that the urban challenges how we approach social theory from any angle: “if such is the ontology of world making today, then any pretense of knowing...has to be dropped. We may have to settle...for a more experimental science accustomed to working with partial and adjusted insights” (2013, 206). While this is a contestation that I hope to return to multiple times throughout this thesis project, I want to hover over this latter statement in relation to 2026.

The film’s spatiotemporal strategies help to break down the totality of the visual as a capturing of knowledge, offering instead a radical partiality through which we as viewers are constantly adjusting to produce generative ideas from the images of the man in the abandoned present, or even onto the black screen. Here is where I believe such images offer renewed
possibilities regarding our capabilities of thought, vision, and sensibility—unravelling fluid understandings of situated social and political contexts that go beyond specific disciplinary boundaries. It is towards further situating this context of thinking through and with images in the spatiotemporal complexities of the contemporary Cairo context that I thus turn.

First exhibited in 2010, 2026 emerged within a tense political environment of nationwide discontentment built up towards the end of the Hosni Mubarak regime. It was a time marked by events and energies that anticipated the eventual 2011 revolts, wherein there emerged not only different forms of street protest but also many alternative ways of imagining the political throughout different social spaces in Egypt. For example, Reem Saad (2012) highlights how talk of dreams and poetry were particular forms of political expression that predicted the coming of revolt in ways normative political discourse was unable. Such perspectives already ask us to expand our spatiotemporal attentions in terms of where we look to see societal and political change as it occurs at the multiple levels embedded within the social.

2026 enters at a similar moment in its engagement with Othman’s novel, which would also come to be seen as anticipating the 2011 revolts. Writing about the book in the aftermath of Mubarak’s overthrow by the Egyptian public, Othman (2011) reflects on his long-gestating writing process and the resonation between his version of revolution in 2053 and what occurred after the book was published: “I was amazed by the similarities. I cried for three or four hours. I was thinking this change would take thirty or forty years….But that I would see it so soon…I couldn’t believe it” (Othman, 2011). His words speak to Hanan Sabea’s framing of the 18 days of mass street protests in January and February 2011 as a “time out of time,” marking a sense of temporal disruption that bursts through the familiar, “making it possible to imagine other modalities of being” (Sabea, 2013). As these different perspectives show, the work of making other modalities possible has no start or end point within a bounded moment.
of revolt but is a continual process of interlacing energies of refusal and disruption, of dwelling and lifemaking.

Such continuities can thus be seen in the hundreds of messages sent to the email address written into Othman’s novel: here readers responded not with opinions on the novel but their personal visions of the future and plans of action in the years leading up to the revolution (Othman, 2011). It was also etched across my recent seminar with Dr. Sabea on theorizing the state, which occurred simultaneous to the September 2019 protests and the thousands of disappearances and arrests that arose in their immediate aftermath. Within this most recent context, the scrutiny that the majority of my classmates expressed towards applying academic frameworks of hope and possibility in Cairo reflects in some ways why I think 2026’s strategies of visual refusal are so compelling to look back to and ruminate over.

At a time when the hope for political revolution as imagined since the build-up to 2011 has been wavering, it is significant that 2026 deliberately draws our attentions away from the climactic political moment in the novel to the intermediary year 2026—where we instead track complex spatialities of a reimagined Giza area via the standpoint of the abandoned present everyday. This does not mean, however, that in turning our focus away from common sites of political iconography, we are necessarily negating the significance of scholarship on how images have and continue to play a constitutive role in how the political is defined, debated, and reimagined in times of revolt, and especially the manner in which “Tahrir triggered a new visual culture” (Abaza, 2014, 171). Given, though, the current violence being committed to the spatial order of Tahrir square to reduce the possibility of any dwelling and gathering there—which also resonates with the increasing securitization and privatization occurring throughout the city—politics in the way it has often been casted in Cairo is becoming increasingly harder to “see.” It thus might be a relevant time to rethink
with films such as 2026 the question not only of which spaces otherwise to Tahrir to look to but also how else to approach the image as a social theoretical tool.

Moreover, I am supported in this effort by current scholarship in urban theory that has called for us to re-frame the political with a focus on the present everydayness of contemporary urban experience. While this may seem in one way to be a pessimistic turn away from the possibilities of revolt, Abourahme (2011) alternatively reminds us that in contexts where conventional forms of political action are increasingly diminished, “to recognize and address them [everyday actors and practices] is not to ignore questions of transformation; rather it is to take the present and the possibility of its eventual transition seriously” (459-60). AbdouMaliq Simone (2010) adds to this perspective in his contestation that “if we are not willing to find a way to live and discover within the worlds these residents have made…do we not undermine the very basis on which we would work to make cities more liveable for all?” (333). This marks a significant shift in terms of how we might alter our theoretical energies and epistemic frameworks away from future imaginaries and towards expanding our engagements with the political to reframe our readings of the everyday-lived social.

In taking such political framing to the question of thinking through and with images, we might then return to Abourahme’s (2014) rumination on the documentary Future Suspended. He especially hones in on the film’s ability to rearrange the senses, highlighting a sensory reading in the film’s opening segment that can generatively contribute to larger political conversations regarding confronting the city’s undeniable ruin:

The aesthetic force of Future Suspended is not in answering these questions but in posing them to us through a new dimension of sensibility. That is, helping us see and hear what we thought we already knew through a different arrangement of sensemaking practices. (578)
Such practices of reworking our senses are what Abourahme highlights as upturning our very conceptions of space and the political potentials of the present. He therefore locates the latter in a move beyond the nostalgia of postcolonial and socialist futures and back towards the possibilities that already exist through the salvage of ruin.

All of these elements similarly converge within the “science fiction of the present” (Abourahme, 2014) that is 2026’s turn the abandoned everyday we as viewers look at while simultaneously listening to the violence and opulence of Othman’s imagined dystopic future. That these images have the ability to point us towards the ruin that makes up present conditions of urbanity, recasting our current political frameworks by reworking our sensibilities through strategies of visual refusal, is what I think 2026 can start to open for us in the Cairo context. Building from this particular urban theoretical framework has allowed me to contextualize some of the disruptions built within the film: from its confined spatial focus to its visual turn away from the future—and even farther from its “revolutionary” potentials. This offers a different mode for thinking through and with the images of films within the complex flows of the urban and thus as a more critical tool for reading the unfolding of political experience in Cairo that does not have to be bound to previous spatiotemporal framings.

For this thesis project, my engagement with a small selection of seven contemporary Cairo films is therefore based around their attentiveness to an everyday-lived register of different social spaces across the city that allows us to re-frame the political potential of the present in this context. I particularly spend time looking back on and rethinking this nexus of “pre-” and “post-” revolutionary Cairo in moving from my reading of 2026 to films released and exhibited in the three years after the revolution. At a time when the potentials for thinking visual culture in registers of political revolution are becoming increasingly harder to track (Abaza, 2016, 115), social theory as a whole nevertheless continues to call on Cairo
through these imaginaries (e.g., Amar, 2013; Butler in Badiou et al., 2016; Esmeir, 2012; Mitchell, 2012). How instead might we re-engage with images of a “post-revolutionary” Cairo to re-frame questions of political subjectivity otherwise to street protest, unravel underlying layers of the political through material spaces of the everyday-lived, and ultimately develop more critical sensory readings of the social which embrace a partiality of knowing?

Despite, then, that 2026 is working in a more gestural mode than the films I move to in the following chapters, which engage the excesses of the everyday-lived more directly, I continue to hesitate on 2026 because it addresses such fundamental questions about the visual in a conceptual sense. This is an especially important concept to ruminate over in this thesis project’s ultimate turn to sensory readings of the social, and I thus return to a final reading of 2026 to close this chapter: in building once again from its acts of visual refusal, I develop renewed methodological approaches to the image that critically guide my interventions in the following three chapters.

**III – The openness of refusal, re-sensing the visual**

The final passage of 2026 describes a long scene of an armored car coming from the distance with young children running after it. Over an image of the man sitting with his mouth slightly agape, the children are described in detail:

“The children are almost naked wearing rags. Their heads are shaved, and their eyes are wide and deep” [“al-‘iyāl shibah ‘arāyan, lābisīn khurqq yadūb satarāhum. rāshum maḥalūqah wa-‘ayūnhum wāsi’ah wa-ghawītah”].

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We continue to stare at the unmoving face of the observer. Then the screen goes blank. He describes their skeleton-like bodies and the car moving forward as the children scream and beat against it.

“Nothing affects it, as if it is moving in another time” [“māfish ḥāgah bitā’thir fiḥā, kā’īnahā māshiya fī zaman thāny’”].

We return to the man, the images set in motion through quicker cuts, as he starts to almost writhe in the hammock.

“The children’s screams become louder and more hysterical” [“ṣarīkh al-‘iyāl a’alī, a’alī bishakl ḥīstirī gidan”].

The man leans up, reaches for the wires over his eyes. As the children fight, grab, and beat one another over bags of trash thrown out of the security tower through which the car is about to enter, we see him holding his hand up to his throat as if choking.

“At the same time, the car starts moving slowly into the room” [“fī nafs al-waqt, al-‘arabiyya bitidkhal bi-buṭ’a shādīd gūwwah, gūwwah al-awḍah”].

Suddenly he sits in his place again, seeming much calmer.

“And the door closes behind it. A finely dressed man and woman step out of the car” [“wa-bayitiqfil warāhum al-bāb wa-bayinzil min al-‘arabiyya rāgīl wa-sitt fī qimmat al-anaqah”].

We continue to pause on his face.

“The wall in front of them is glass, opening onto the pyramid’s plateau. As for the remaining three walls, they are like the other wall, screening images of fabulous natural landscapes” [“al-ḥīṭa ilī quṣādhom izāz bāyṭul ‘alāh haḍabat al-ḥaram, ammā al-ḥīṭān al-thalāthah al-thānīyin zay al-sūr ma’ruḍ ‘alayhum ṣūr li-munāẓir ṭabī’iyyah khallābah”].

A final image of his face sits on the screen, mouth once again agape—this time almost looking as if he is in a daze—before the screen goes blank (Maamoun, 2010).
This section of the film stands as perhaps its most prominent refusal to visualize, wherein a more markedly violent narrative and particular marginalized subjectivities emerge from a film that has only previously offered fragments of mainly spatial descriptions. That the visuality of images relates deeply to issues of disciplinary power and violence of course remains a significant point of interest for scholars of visual culture. As Patricia Hayes (2005) marks, “there are contexts in which being invisible, unseen and even unknown have been and continue to be preferred options, giving scope and time to negotiate the difficult conditions of social and gendered existence” (522). More recently, Trinh T. Minh-ha (2016) has reminded us that “invisibility is built into each instance of visibility, and the very forms of invisibility generated within the visible are often what is at stake in a struggle” (132). As the previous section has highlighted, 2026 in its very construction is highly aware of the reifications of disciplinary power enacted by the visuality of film. Yet how do we account for the ways in which we as viewers still interact with this imagery, if decidedly not through the compatible sensory order of filmic image and sound? What beyond the contestation of power is visual refusal then generative of if we are to place it in conversation with strands of social theory more interested in sensory readings of how life is lived otherwise to the machinations of power?

As way of response, I offer two ways to begin re-reading 2026’s refusals otherwise to a strict understanding of what is visually shown in the film while still remaining critical of how we contextualize an expanded sensory reading of the social beyond the visual. While highlighting the primacy of the visual in the history of Western knowledges is an important critique to offer when engaging sensory readings of the image, scholars such as Tarek Elhaik are simultaneously concerned about overstating how tapping into different sensorial nodes is an essentially non-Western way of experiencing life that the West has lost (2016, 27). I thus continue to work with the visual and its attendant questions of coloniality and disciplinary
power throughout this thesis to remain grounded in how I think through the potentialities of the image.

Borrowing from the contributions of visual culture scholars Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2012) and Tina Campt (2017, 2019a, 2019b), I use their critical work around interactive readings of images and engaging their “quiet” registers to build out renewed methodological directions regarding the contemporary Cairo context. By bringing these and other scholars of the image together with my turn to urban space, I am able to frame the specific inquiries that I undergo in the following two chapters of my thesis. Ultimately, I bring together these methodological and theoretical challenges to frame my overall intervention into current anthropological discourse on sensory engagement—which I have outlined in the prologue—in the final chapter.

In regards to the repeated presence of the blank screen in 2026, I want to mark an interactive quality that can be read onto the screen here—how it allows us to engage the spatiotemporal context of the film aside from what is seen on screen. In particular, I wonder what insights might be brought by using the blank screen as an invitation to return to the specific spatial context of the film at a different and deeply resonant moment. I borrow here from Azoulay’s reformation of photography as marking a form of visual culture that goes beyond the confines of the frame and the event of photographic capture—calling instead for us to interactively contest and contextualize images. In reframing visual culture at particular sites of social, physical, and sexual violence experienced in the ongoing Palestinian Nakba, Azoulay highlights how “my intervention…shows the necessity of addressing a body of photographs that has never come into being” (2012, 20). Here she reads beyond the set power relations of images embedded within visual regimes of the Israeli apartheid state to reconsider the affected lives of Palestinians and demand that we define these complex subjectivities on renewed terms.
To turn to 2026 in this interactive manner—and at this current moment—is an especially resonant gesture. The film was first exhibited in 2010, which is also when the official plan for the Grand Egyptian Museum was announced. Within the film, this museum emerges as a significant contrast to the informal housing made invisible by the city’s desire for a developed, modernist aesthetic. Moreover, its dramatic introduction is preceded by and bleeds into one of 2026’s longest pauses on the blank screen.

“The only building visible on the horizon…is the grand Egyptian museum” [“al-mabná al-waḥīd ʾīlī ḥanār ʾīl al-bīr…huwwa al-matḥif al-maṣrī”].

Returning to the film today, we might think of how its descriptions of the building, and the extravagance of the necropolis more generally, resonate with renewed layers of meaning:

“Statues, pharaonic chariots, and various antiquities in glass vitrines” [“tamāthīl wa-‘arabiyyat faru’wanīyah wa-tuḥaf mukhtalifah fī ṣanādīq izāz”].

“Great precision in every architectural detail, transparent surfaces, fine metallic lines” [“diqqah mutanāhiyah fī al-tafāṣīl al-mariya, musaṭṭaḥat shafāfah, khutūt ma’diniyah raqīqaḥ”] (Maamoun, 2010).

I am speaking specifically of placing such descriptions in context with promotional pictures of the now completed museum that have recently emerged online—in many ways realizing the dystopic opulence that the film describes. As I re-watch 2026, it is difficult for me to not place these images in conversation with the blank screen over which the descriptions play: the two gigantic pharaonic statues that guard a giant hall in the museum, the intricacy of its excessively tall ceilings, and the extravagant mosaic walls littered with pyramid designs.

By generating from the refusals of the blank screen in this way, I hope to first highlight a renewed interactive relationship with the image that emerges from the social theoretical focus on urban space that I have so far been highlighting. Refusal in this case emerges as a practice of discernment, patience, and lateral forms of thinking and sensing: that
after ten years these fictional descriptions would become almost fully actualized dually speaks to the inevitability of visual regimes as to the distinct need for rebuilding from what else is available in the present.

As such, Chapter II moves us from the strategies of visual refusal exhibited in 2026 to everyday-lived contexts of Cairo in the aftermath of the revolution. By setting up my re-examination of this “post-revolutionary” period through Hala Elkoussy’s *Al-baḥth ‘an madīna [In search of a city]* (2012), I ask how we might begin to rethink the images of Cairo that have been used to create a particular global imaginary of political subjectivity: the coming together of “bodies in alliance” (Butler, 2011) at Tahrir square in 2011. In complicating this imaginary, as well as noting its influence not only globally but within situated studies of the Egyptian and Cairo contexts, I argue that the urban theoretical framework of “throwntogetherness” (Massey, 2005) offers a critical approach through which we can expand how space intersects into our readings of political subjectivity in the image. I then offer a reading of Omar Al Shamy’s *Karim* (2011) that brings together divergent readings of the “street” to challenge how we bring different subjects together through collective political imaginaries. This reading is aided by Azoulay’s framework of interacting with images, contesting their underlying power relations, and contextualizing alternative approaches to political subjectivity. I then finally move to a reading of Kinda Hassan and Dalia Naous’ *Cairography* (2013) to consider how—in conversation with AbdouMaliq Simone’s (2012) conception of “screens”—we might contest and further contextualize recent theoretical framing around political subjectivity in the city via its most readily visible spatial contexts. In so doing, I set up the dynamics for my subsequent inquiry in Chapter III regarding how we use urban space to critically read underlying layers of the political otherwise to conceptions of action and inaction.
This brings me to my second engagement in expanding from 2026’s visual approach, which further elaborates on the political everyday context in which my turn to urban space is grounded. I take inspiration from Tina Campt’s critical work on Black visual cultures to highlight what she terms the “quiet but resonant frequencies of images” as they relate to the political (2017, 11). Her work fully centers positioning the image as “inseparable from other sensory encounters…and indelibly shaped and determined by modalities of apprehension often seen as subordinate or supplemental to vision” (2019a, 81). I would especially like to turn to her conception of still-moving images, which she reads through short films of the prominent Black American visual artist Arthur Jafa: “they refuse the formal opposition between still and moving images, affirming instead the disorderly power of stasis by vibrating in place, simultaneously in motion both with and without a minimal shift of position in space or time” (2019b, 34-5). This opens a strategy of visual refusal that alternatively engages our senses, especially recasting images in relation to the aural. She links an openness to sensibilities ingrained within “quiet” images to the everyday-lived registers of the political that often go unread when focused on normative sites and forms of political action.

These underlying qualities similarly emerge within the sensory experience of 2026, wherein its liminal position between stillness and movement creates what Campt terms “affective labor” (2019b, 27): in other words, certain affects are managed and denied in the film through its sensual disconnections. There is little synchrony as to when the screen turns to and returns from blankness, and though certain images come together for viewers to read a particular response from the man undergoing the experiment, the film cuts off any attempt to definitively do so. Take for example when the man begins writhing in the hammock, reaching at the wires connected to his eyes as though he might pull them, holding his hands to his neck as if he might choke—only for the next still image to emerge, overly projecting a sense of calmness with his hand resting behind his head. Perhaps sound, the tone of the man’s voice
and his consistent choral of exhaustive gestures, is where we can best contest any sense of calmness that appears on screen.

No matter what it is exactly, ultimately a mix of sensory qualities in critical intersection with the visual converge to give 2026’s final image a certain connotation—what I read as a daze in the man’s face—that goes well beyond this single image and which might even be out of my bounds to definitively state. Yet rather than needing to present any exact answers, the film’s overall sensory experience—of sounds, images, and managed and denied affects that alternately express curiosity, exhaustion, and a push forward that is certainly difficult but nevertheless occurs—is also its own encapsulation of a political condition of existing in contemporary Cairo spatialities that deserves further examination.

Chapter III thus returns us more focally to how the underlying layers of the political might be re-read by thinking through and with the images of Hala Lotfy’s Al-khurūg lil-nahār [Coming forth by day] (2012). By first addressing the pace and perspective from which we might approach the political everyday in conversation with Johanna Domke and Marouan Omara’s Qas [Crop] (2012), I highlight how an attentiveness to the material in the images of Al-khurūg allow us to challenge previous framings around the political everyday, especially in relation to affect. Moreover, I look at how we might build on this framing of the image through conceptions of secretion (Simone and Pieterse, 2018) and spill-over (Abourahme, 2015) from urban global south scholarship, allowing us to pivot from frameworks of subjective action and inaction and to instead open to ever-changing and contingent nodes of potentiality and violence in the politicized urban everyday. I then connect such a perspective to Tina Campt’s (2017) conception of “quiet” images as a way to reconsider the space of the home in the film as a particular node through which we can respond to the decreased access to publicness in Cairo today, which opens significant implications for how we might re-approach the urban social. In unravelling such layers of the political, I hope—as I turn in
setting up the final chapter—to offer renewed modalities for reading the liminality of private and public space within Cairo through renewed sensory engagement with the image.

Chapter IV, then, brings together the different inquiries throughout this thesis project by turning to Maha Maamoun’s *Al-shuhub tudhakirunī bil-mutanaṣṣītīn* [Shooting stars remind me of eavesdroppers] (2013) to frame the overall intervention that this thesis provides. I begin by introducing the critical contributions of how the aural intersects into the visual in *Al-shuhub*, which I especially read through anthropologist Ghassan Hage’s (2013) work on eavesdropping as allowing us to understand existence otherwise to “states of purposefulness” (90). In bringing this into conversation with urban theory, I particularly note the relevance of this framing in responding to this contemporary Cairo context that has extended from before the “post-revolutionary” period into the difficult political horizon facing the city today. I then think about how this critical turn to the urban through and with the images of *Al-shuhub* allows us to further situate how anthropologists are currently framing the creative potentials of sensory engagement, which I especially pull out by using Nassar’s (2013) contributions on contesting notions of publicness in her ethnographic work on Al-Azhar park. Lastly, I reflect on the larger intervention of this thesis project through the modality of eavesdropping as allowing us to re-approach how we use the sensory to balance creative and critical registers of engaging the image in complex contexts such as contemporary Cairo.

Ultimately, this initial reading of 2026 in the larger context of this thesis serves to reiterate the significant theoretical, methodological, and political potentials that underlie what may initially appear as simple acts of the visual, or that of its refusal. As Azoulay reminds us, the image “is never sufficient in and of itself….Rather the image is always the point of departure for a voyage whose route—the route of the utterances ramifying off the image—is never known in advance” (2012, 61). 2026, nor the rest of the films engaged in this thesis,
may never have been made with the intention to address the exact theoretical conversations
with which this thesis project brings it into conversation, but as it becomes further
contextualized within a process of breaking down previous assumptions placed onto the
social, our abilities to think through and with its images to probe more complex questions
simultaneously open up. If nothing else, it serves as a reminder that I carry with me
throughout this thesis that visualizing Cairo is as much a process of undoing, of a demand to
look and listen in different directions and with renewed attentions, as it is of turning a camera
onto the city.
Chapter II – Intersections of space and subjectivity in the image

A woman—her back centered in the frame, the street in front of her out of focus—is shot in a quick series of still images to the sound of a camera clicking. She is searching for the man who requested to meet her at Al-Moski area, which the narrator describes as:

“The gateway to Old Cairo, it refuses to be a representation of something else” [“al-bawwābatuh ʿlī al-qāhiratih al-qadīmah, tarfiṭu anna taqadduma nafṣuha kātamthīlin li-shay’in ukhar”].

The framing switches, the shot now filled with different figures either standing in the street or walking past. The figure of a man turned to the side takes the center of the image, blurred as this woman, Sein, emerges from behind him to make her way through the narrow street. As she exits the frame, the focus falls on the passing, anonymous faces of those walking towards the camera.

“It was not built on this basis. There are no signposts, open spaces nor grand facades” [“fā-hiyya lam tūnī ʿalah hadhā al-asās fa-lā wugūdu li-maqmūʿatī irshādāt aw ammakunna maftūḥah aw wāghīthin mahībatah”].

The faces of young men appear on the left side of the screen and then disappear in a blur of ‘abāyāt and isdāl (different forms of women’s clothing) as women walk by the opposite direction. For a second, the camera’s focus falls on the right corner of the frame, where a shop selling women’s clothes in plastic packages peeks through the figures walking by.

“But the colonized city had to be legible and controllable by the political and economic apparatus of the colonizer” [“lakinna al-madīnatan almusta’mirah lābidu anna tuṣbīḥu maqrūʿatīn mudhallilah li-ṣāliḥi al-ḥiṣābāt al-ṣīāṣīyati wa-aliqtiṣādiati lil-qūwīyi al-musta’mirah”].

Sein emerges as she passes through other pedestrians then exits the frame again. A new shot fades in with people standing on the left side of the frame, perhaps waiting in line at a shop,
while those on the right side attempt to pass. One man steps backwards to open more space for those passing through.

“But there was one obstacle: the crowds” [“walakinna kānat hunāka mushakkilah: al-gumū’u”].

Sein is one of the people who passes by, her figure coming into focus as her shoulder bumps against a woman, coming the opposite direction, whose face then falls out of focus as she walks in front of the camera and exits the frame.

“The crowds had to be ordered and rendered productive. The people had to be organized in a disciplined unit called a nation” [“fā-wagab anna tanazzūma al-gumū’i wa-taṣabbuḥī mutfi’atihih wa-muntighah, afarāduhā mushakkilūn ‘alah hay’ati kiyāni munazzāmi muhadhdhab yusamī al-ummah”] (Elkoussy, 2012).

This scene from Hala Elkoussy’s *Al-baḥth ‘an madīna* (2012) is the first of three encounters with everyday-lived spaces of Cairo in the immediate years after the revolution that I turn to in this chapter to think through questions of political subjectivity as they relate to the image. Here, we are first met with a curiously similar visual style to that of 2026: still images of a single person, once again set in motion as they are placed together—this time accompanied by the actual sound of the camera shooting. Yet this moment in *Al-baḥth* quickly opens to an everyday-lived register that puts many of the questions 2026 offers into a more complicated visual field: the sheer presence of the camera in a busy street demands a focus that is more wandering, less certain, and always changing. If we agree that 2026 opens a different pathway towards which we might re-approach the question of the visual in contemporary Cairo—one that highlights the political potentials of the present everyday—there are nevertheless a significant amount of implications to be considered in terms of how and from where we re-approach the present everyday as a site for rethinking political subjectivity through and with the image.
In turning its camera to Al-Moski, *Al-baḥth* unearths a fundamental question regarding how the disciplinary structures of colonialism define urban subjectivities in a manner that is highly dependent on their visibility in the public sphere. The image of the city that is envisioned by colonial regimes—heard here in the desire for open spaces, signposts, and grand facades—is one of subjective control via power over shaping the materiality of the city. The relatively mundane image of the present-day street that is offered by *Al-baḥth* nevertheless serves to disrupt such colonial imaginaries, pointing to how the crowds of Cairo remain “thrown together,” to adapt the term coined by Doreen Massey (2005), otherwise to this image of the city: the various people who momentarily meet and pass by one another without any defined form, who alternately bump into one another or turn a shoulder to let others make their way through the physical layout of the narrow street.

It is interesting that *Al-baḥth* creates this juxtaposition between colonial imaginaries of the city and the everyday-lived Al Moski area given the film’s emergence in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolts. In this short moment, the film actually brings us through a significant period of historical transition by marking Cairo’s turn from a physically colonized space to the capital of a postcolonial nation-state. In the post-revolutionary context in which the film enters—its dedication is also made in the names of those who lost their lives during the revolts—we might note how a different disruption of the national subjective imaginary by the crowds, one which has resonated across the globe, is being called on: the Tahrir square protests wherein, in the words of Judith Butler (2011), “‘horizontal relations’ among the protestors formed easily and methodically, and quickly it seemed that relations of equality, which included an equal division of labour between the sexes, became part of the very resistance to Mubarek’s regime and its entrenched hierarchies” (Butler, 2011, 16-7). This image of people collectively assembling of their own volition and in opposition to the autocratic nation-state continues to define the height of political possibility not only for
international scholars such as Butler and W. J. T. Mitchell (2012) but also within some of the most popular social theoretical works written on the Egyptian context in the past decade (Amar, 2013; Esmeir, 2012).

How, however, might we be able to differently think this political framing around subjectivity as presented through the images of Al-Moski in Al-ḥaṭṭ? In the very mundane spatial context of these images, the relatively unchanged and uncontrolled movement of people on this street and across this historical time period allows us to contest the reading of space and subjectivity that emerges from an overwhelming focus on the political possibility of street protest at Tahrir square. There is both a longer-standing and constitutive relation to “the street” and urban space to be considered here, wherein we might more critically think through the occult social folds wherein subjects do not always come together in such visible “collectives.” At the same time, the turn to the everyday-lived calls on us to look otherwise to the image of active agents of resistance and thereby re-invigorate our faculties to see and think political subjectivity otherwise.

In this chapter, I address how we might turn from a global political imaginary of Cairo, one that offers a particular image of collective political subjectivity, by instead expanding our spatiotemporal attentions otherwise to iconic moments of street protest in 2011. By thinking through and with images of different everyday-lived spaces in Cairo, I argue that the urban theoretical framework of throwntogetherness (Massey, 2005) offers a more critical approach through which we can see how urban space intersects into our readings of political subjectivity in the image. I provide a reading of Karim (2011) that places divergent readings of the “street” in counterpoint to challenge how we bring different subjects together through collective political imaginaries. This reading is aided by the work of Ariella Azoulay in providing a framework to interact with images, contest their underlying power relations, and contextualize expanded approaches to political subjectivity. I then
finally move to a reading of *Cairography* (2013) to consider how—in conversation with Simone’s (2012) conception of “screens”—we might contest and further contextualize recent theoretical framing around political subjectivity in the city via its hypervisible spatial contexts. In so doing, I set up the dynamics for my subsequent inquiry in Chapter III regarding how we use urban space to critically read underlying layers of the political otherwise to conceptions of action and inaction.

*I – Imagining political subjectivity*

In his rumination on the image, space, and revolution on the first anniversary of the January 25th protests, W. J. T. Mitchell (2012) argues that:

> The figure that circulates globally, that embraces both Tahrir Square and Zuccotti Park, and has perhaps been overlooked because it is hiding in plain sight, is the figure of occupation itself. But occupation and the Occupy movement have no definite form or figure other than the dialectical poles of the mass and the individual, the assembled crowd and the lone, anonymous figure of resistance. (9)

Mitchell’s framing here speaks to a particular global imaginary around revolution that came about as a result of the parallels that many saw in disseminated images of the Tahrir protests with those of other “squares” movements around this time, especially the Occupy movement in the US. While Mitchell is able to provoke certain questions around the potential for democracy and new forms of governance, the detailed textures and broader spatiotemporal groundings of the Cairo context beyond widely-distributed images of Tahrir get lost within this overwhelming focus on what brings these different global movements together. At the level of subjectivity, we are then lost within a universal argument around “the mass and the individual” (Mitchell, 2012, 9), wherein the theoretical and political space between these two poles might instead be more concretely addressed in readings of the image that move beyond this singular spatiotemporal context.
Popular imaginaries around the political in Cairo are however still stuck within universalizing gestures—producing, in the words of Scheuller (2009), a state of being “confronted with the spectre of the global becoming imperial” (250). In this case, social theorists are particularly focused on how collective subjectivities are formed through relatively isolated readings of public space—which I continue to read through Butler’s (in Badiou et al., 2016) framing of this context. In Butler’s arguing that “the ‘we’ voiced in language is already enacted by the assembly of bodies, their gestures and movements, their vocalizations, and their ways of acting in concert,” (50) she assumes a collective definition of the “people” that we actually have little knowledge of or way to imagine them other than their necessary opposition to and separation from the “representative regime” (in Badiou et al., 2016, 52). While these remain important dynamics for the different forms of political mobilization that are being performed across the world, frameworks such as Butler’s leave little room to think “beyond the negative” (Abourahme, 2013, 721) and connect to otherwise forms of living that already exist in the city.

While I acknowledge that Mitchell and Butler’s arguments are necessarily based around a sense of singularity conjured in the space of Tahrir square, the larger issue is that this global imaginary of street protest has continued to limit how political subjectivity is thought even when contextualized beyond such moments of revolt. In noting Butler’s call to separate the assembly of protesters “bodies” from the “representative” regime, we might connect this back to Lefebvre and Massey’s contestations of the strict separation between the discursive and the material rather than thinking through their dynamic co-existences. What underlying issues then emerge in such frameworks when moving to the embedded everyday urban contexts on which this work is focused?

Within the urban global south in particular, such conversations have transformed to contesting readings of political subjectivity as guided between an oppositional framing of
survivalism and resistance: the former is defined by the power enacted on relatively passive subjects by discursive power structures, while the latter notes the emancipatory possibility of active agents fighting in opposition to these structures (see Abourahme, 2011; Millar, 2018). Yet as Abourahme (2011) asks in his ethnographic account of Palestinians displaced within the West Bank, “how do we interpret the colonial subject that is neither in revolt nor in open crisis? What kind of languages of signification do we read, if any, in her/his quotidian practices? How to avoid reading and ascribing intent?’ (2011, 455). Such questions demand that we think through the spatiotemporal contexts that undergird a supposed life of survival in ways that make visible different forms, even if partially rather than fully collective ones, of political subjectivity alternative to the image of active agents of revolt.

This is a framing that has yet to be widely applied in the context of Cairo, as well as Egypt more broadly. In Esmeir’s (2012) historical examination of modern and colonial law in Egypt, for instance, she closes her book with an abrupt call back to the 2011 protests as moving outside of the violent order of juridical humanity and affirming “a subject who rejects the system of bondage with the state and its law” (285). This continual framing of subjectivity through the language of rejecting a necessarily separated system never allows us to move beyond what has been made “hypervisible” (Amar, 2013, 16) about politics in the global imaginary of Cairo. Therefore, even as someone like Amar (2013) delves into a longer history of everyday contexts across Cairo, his ultimate framing turns back to the “female assertive agency” (35) at Tahrir that inspires an abstracted collective of “new subjects of politics in the Global South” (22). While such works undeniably provide necessary understandings of legal and neoliberal forms of disciplinary power, the idea here is that they return to the same notions of political subjectivity rather than allow us to expand such frameworks.
Once more, the issue is not that the powerful imagery of political subjectivity that emerged from the 2011 revolts is not useful to social theoretical discussions around the political, and of course opposition to the regime was and has been a significant form of coalition building and mobilization in the lived contexts of political action in Cairo. Rather, there are underlying assumptions around our reading of subjectivity and urban space that must be placed under scrutiny if we are going to more fundamentally address how “the sublime spectacle of pure popular power sweeping away tyranny, could only ever be ephemeral and temporary; this irresistible force—beyond both party and state—only ever a momentary rupture” (Abourahme and Jayussi, 2011, 626). I instead provide renewed readings of images of political subjectivity that connect this “time out of time,” to return to Sabea’s (2013) framing of the revolts, back to the everyday contexts which have tended to assume a less eminent theoretical position in these discussions.

My turn to the everyday urban then opens up significant questions to be thought through regarding how urban theory’s turn to space allows us to challenge such images of political subjectivity, particularly in calling on Massey’s conception of throwntogetherness to expand these aforementioned readings of political subjectivity. The urban, as Massey (2005) explains in her chapter on throwntogetherness, operates as “both condition of and provocation to new thinking….a rethinking of city space - as accumulation of layers, as ungraspable juxtapositions, and so forth” (159). Yet for her it is not necessarily that there is an inherent quality to the urban that sets it apart from other forms of living—rather, there is something within the “extremity of cities” (2005, 159) that might offer a more ample zone for experimenting with previous social theoretical frameworks.

This is what Ash Amin (2013) ultimately calls forth in his rumination on the urban condition, wherein he uses throwntogetherness as a way to reposition our reading of the social:
To look into the city is not to look into a complex mechanical entity such as a clock that, once opened and scrutinized with the rules of timekeeping machines, becomes transparent in all its workings and, for this, fixable. Instead, it is to look into a constellation of entities, networks, and systems with their own logics and dynamics that are only ever partially visible and always emergent in their combinations. (206)

The turn to “constellations” and “combinations” here, especially when multiple forms of knowing and living particular social experiences are at stake, is an attempt to uproot several of the ways in which our readings of the social have produced relatively set dynamics. In the context of political subjectivity to which this chapter turns, this means more centrally addressing “the extent to which residents live a life ‘in between,’ where contrary dimensions of urban life would seem to come together but, in a fundamental way, do not” (Simone, 2010, 128). In other words, this means tracking what occult folds may underlie the collective forms of subjectivity that have continued to define the political in Cairo, using images of the everyday-lived to simultaneously disrupt and generate otherwise to these previous frameworks.

What I am most interested in highlighting here is that our question of subjectivity in relation to images is thus one that cannot be thought through in an isolated spatiotemporal context but rather is immediately intersected by different everyday-lived contexts of confronting the political and thus the multiple entry points through which the subject is approached epistemically. In this chapter, the attempt to deliberately make our readings of subjectivity “only ever partially visible” (Amin, 2013, 206) is performed particularly in regards to how the urban spatial contexts in and around the image intersect into and complicate our readings of subjectivity in the “post-revolutionary” context. How, now that such grounding has been laid, might we now think through and with the image in the urban context outlined by Massey and Amin?

To start building in this direction, I offer a reading of Omar Al Shamý’s short documentary Karim (2011) wherein divergent readings of the “street” emerge to challenge
how we bring different subjects together through collective political imaginaries. In particular, I show how such challenges demand that we think more fundamentally through the power relations inherent in the image, beginning with Ariella Azoulay’s (2012) critical perspective on visual culture studies.

II - Contesting and contextualizing “the street”

*Karim* opens on a shot of McDonald’s windows with couples and families sitting at the tables inside. Young boys stand on the street below—resting up against the wall of the restaurant, smoking, talking, helping cars park. One of these young boys is the titular subject of Omar Al Shamy’s short film, which provides a glimpse into a type of precarious life lived on the streets of Cairo that is highly visible to the public. This visibility has of course drawn attention from the state, for whom the presence of children living on the street disrupts the desired image of the modernist city, and the various INGOs working in Cairo, for whom they conventionally remain subjects to save from their destitute conditions. This, then, is the context to which Al Shamy’s film enters mere months after the 2011 revolts.

*Karim* takes place in Al-Manial neighborhood and appears to span across one evening, wherein the director intermittently sits back to observe the young boy and his friends on the street and also enters into the events of the film to ask his own questions. Certain elements, then, might occur at one level and repeat at the other. For instance, we watch as Karim motions a car into an empty space on the curb, his back to the camera as we read on his shirt: “hand in hand, we build Egypt anew” [“īd fī īd nāmā maṣr min gādīd”]. Later, the camera shot directly on Karim in conversation with the filmmaker, Al Shamy asks him from where he received the shirt—a man who Karim repeatedly mentions as helping out young boys living on the street. Al Shamy then probes further as to where the shirt is originally from, as UNICEF is written in English on the front. Karim attempts to pronounce
the name of the INGO, which causes Al Shamy to laugh and ask him to repeat what he said. The young boy is hesitant—he knows he is not pronouncing it correctly—and stumbles through a few pronunciations until Al Shamy himself says the name. Karim responds energetically, repeating the name as he continues to speak.

Other elements are fully introduced by Al Shamy irrespective of the material that the camera captures. As the young boy explains how this same man was planning to help different children open a kushk (literally translated as kiosk, meaning a small stand on the street selling snacks and cigarettes), Al Shamy interjects.

“This was after the revolution?” [“dah kān ba’d al-thawrah?”].

The question does not seem to register as relevant to Karim.

“No, way before the revolution” [“lā, qabl al-thawrah bil-kathīr”].

Karim continues his original train of thought only to have Al Shamy now ask him what this man’s opinion of the revolution is—whether Karim ever talked to him about it. Karim again does not appear to register the question as relevant, has not talked to this man about the revolution, and tells Al Shamy that had he taken to Tahrir Square at that time, he would have gone to pickpocket people.

“The street taught me that” [“anā al-shārī’īlī a’lamnī kidah”] (Al Shamy, 2011).

How I have thought through and with the images in Karim has changed significantly since I first screened the film. I initially felt as though any generative reading of Karim’s subjectivity in the film is immediately undermined by the epistemic violence committed by Al Shamy in the ways he exposes, laughs at, and pushes his own understanding of the political onto the young boy. It reflected a schism similar to that outlined by Mitchell (2012) in his engagement with global images of revolution: those of the joy of street protest, wholly reflecting the political potential of the people, and those of the sorrow of violence, wholly reflecting the disciplinary power of the state (15). For the context of my thesis project, we
might pivot this to differentiate between images which wholly reify the focus on street protest as outlined in the above section and those which alternately produce otherwise forms of thinking political subjectivity. What the method of thinking through and with images instead offers, however, are strategies through which the co-existences of power and potentiality, and our attendant abilities to critique and create, might be unraveled in the image. By working through this method, I develop the framework through which I highlight occult folds of political subjectivity in the divergent readings of “the street” provided by Al Shamy and Karim.

I first take inspiration from Ariella Azoulay’s (2012) interactive method of reading the image to move beyond readings of visual culture that rest on set power relations. Her contestation challenges us to map our academic work otherwise to the machinations of disciplinary power structures under the specific aim of refusing to define subjectivities merely in opposition to them. As Azoulay argues:

That which is seen, the referent of the photograph in other words, is never a given but needs to be constituted to precisely the same degree as the interpretation that have become attached to it. Even when these traces express cultural and social hierarchies that organize power relations between photographer, camera, and photographed person, they never simply echo such relations nor do they necessarily reflect the point of view of the most powerful figure present in the arena at the time the photograph was captured. (2012, 32)

The uncertainty that Azoulay attempts to reinject into our readings of what is seen in images speaks to the proliferations of meaning that can be inscribed into an image when we are not bound to particular ways of reading it. Azoulay thus frames her work as being enacted through a “practical gaze” rather than a “professional” one: “the practical gaze takes into consideration the possibility of multiple gazes convening on a photograph….what is visible is the continuing effect of the gaze that contemplates it as well as of its practical context” (2012, 62). This allows her to separate her positioning of photography and visual culture from the aforementioned “professional” gazes that for her are ultimately intent on oppositional
readings of aesthetics and politics which overwhelmingly speak to the intentionality of the artist figure.

There is thus a larger question of power relations to consider here, wherein to respond to the question of potentiality we must first address its co-existence with disciplinary power and violence. This speaks to what Alejandro Vallega (2011) refers to as “the coloniality of images,” in marking the structural omnipresence of a dominant modern episteme that decolonial theorists have traced back to the original colonial encounters of 1492 (see Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2000). If otherwise ways of thinking political subjectivity exist—which Karim’s responses might allow us to show—they must be reconciled with their co-existence to dominant forms of knowledge production. For this context, in the legitimate absence of any pathway that might bring forth a full reading of subjectivity in the image, we are instead invited to develop different strategies through which a careful and informed reading of the image might be unraveled. The operative gesture here is embracing the partiality of knowing that the image provides when contextualized beyond strategies of capture or emancipation—of either reifying the machinations of power or resisting them. Co-existence therefore enters as a key frame of reference because it demands a critical balancing of power and potentiality that always sees them as changing, fluid, and co-constitutive nodes.

We might then engage with something writer, photographer, and art historian Teju Cole has recently posed: “when we speak of ‘shooting’ with a camera, we are acknowledging the kinship of photography and violence” (Cole, 2019). To frame the violence of the camera in its very materiality and at this deeply-rooted of a register opens up a significant amount of questions. Larkin’s (2008) work on colonial media infrastructures in northern Nigeria, for example, claims to provide “a different genealogy for the emergence of cinema, one that examines cinematic exchange as governed not by commodity but political relations” (12). He challenges the universalist perspective claiming that the introduction of cinema to different
socialities was always directly tied to industrial modernity and the commodity form. Cinema emerges with a different historicity in Hausa communities’ first interactions with the free mobile cinemas of British colonizing forces, which operates not merely as a marginal history but one with “theoretical ramifications for how we understand cinema as a whole” (2008, 84). This turn in framing thus demands a more flexible, context-dependent approach to how the camera exists and is contested in different spaces at different times.

How then can such an infrastructural perspective transfer to the level of the image—to examples such as young Karim being asked questions within the frame of Al Shamy’s camera? It might be useful to return to Cole and his reading of a late 19th-century photograph of Ijebu Yorubans sitting with the British colonial governor of Lagos. Cole identifies that the British colonial officers have most likely forced the Ijebu king (or oba) to push aside the beads that cover his face, which goes against the god-like status of the king who is supposed to remain concealed. He continues by describing the alarm of the Ijebu men sitting on the ground in front of them: “Many have turned their bodies away from the oba, and several are positioned toward the camera, not in order to look at the camera but in order to avoid looking at the exposed radiance of their king” (Cole, 2019). Here the different dynamics of the image proliferate both within and beyond it: the demand for visibility through image-making has dramatically altered the local context of subjective relations that nevertheless is contested in the form of those who look away. The act of subjects physically looking at the camera does not signify a direct relation to the photographer but rather hints at the complexity of experiences and ideas that converge around the encounter of the image and how we as viewers might confront and contextualize the photograph at different times.

These proliferations in terms not only of how we might position the subjects of images but also how the image can be interpreted in relation to the complexities of the larger social are what bring Azoulay to argue “in favour of what is generally posited as the
unreliability of the photograph, that is to say, its partial, false, biased or contingent nature….because it is impossible to attribute a single sovereign perspective to the photograph” (2012, 20). This offers a form of working with images as a starting point, of placing our contestations to their imbalances in power into practice, thus moving the locus of our theoretical energies away from the possibilities or impossibilities of meaning made by the artist to what a growing knowledge of the people, spaces, and objects in the image might allow us to achieve.

These are dynamics that I already see occurring in urban theory’s complex reading of subjectivity as defined otherwise to oppositional frameworks. For instance, Millar’s (2018) ethnography on informal garbage collectors in Rio de Janeiro takes care to present their everyday lives as complex processes which contain their own form beyond normative conceptions of infrastructure. Nevertheless, she remains critical of how different actors continue to quite literally frame the experiences of garbage collectors. In turning to the internationally-lauded documentary Waste Land—which tracks Vik Muiz’s photography project centered on the garbage dumps where catadores work—Millar focuses on a scene where the photographer asks a catadore to collect garbage to be photographed. Despite the catadore’s explanation of the specific materials he collects, the photographer demands that he mainly collect a flexible type of plastic found in many different products in Brazil because it embodies the idea of “garbage as anything and everything” (Millar, 2018, 31).

As Millar argues, this perspective on garbage not only elides its distinctiveness in relation to other materials but disregards the complicated relationship catadores express to garbage: “It mattered…that certain known trucks or types of bags contained discarded medical supplies (usually to be avoided), stacks of used office paper (to be collected and sold), or nearly, but not yet, expired cartons of yogurt (to be enjoyed)” (2018, 31). What ultimately emerges from such a reading is the ability to contest the power relations
undergirding a particular image, especially in how universal meanings are ascribed onto them in a manner that contradicts the everyday lives of the people being filmed. In particular, the attentiveness to a different pathway is opened up in the catadore’s reading of the spaces and objects that Muiz is photographing: here a much more complicated relationality of these materials with those who collect them is presented, wherein the artist’s reading is not necessarily opposed so much as the encounter around the image is enriched by an informed perspective that begins from the hints actually left behind by the catadore who takes part in the creation of the image.

In the context of *Karim*, this means that there is also a more complex reading of Karim’s subjectivity that can be unravelled beyond its relation to the authority that Al Shamy holds as the filmmaker. In particular, there is a different relationship to the material space in which Karim’s subjectivity is embedded, marking an occult fold in how his reading of the street diverges from Al Shamy’s. I especially refer here to Karim’s explanation that he would only have gone to Tahrir during the revolts to pickpocket people because “the street taught me that” (Al Shamy, 2011), which only further illuminates how we might contest and contextualize Al Shamy’s attachment to this political imaginary.

In Al Shamy’s seeming attempt to bring Karim’s experiences under a collective sense of opposition to state apparatuses that had once taken place “on the street,” Karim’s rebuttal speaks to an ongoing, constitutive relationship with the street that refuses to stabilize it as a symbol of national political discontent. The everyday-lived dimensions of the space where he spends most of his life is one where otherwise forms of living have already been demanded of him, pointing to how those who are most visibly at risk in urban publics are also those already equipped at “assembling their own lives in the most contingent and precarious of circumstances” (Abourahme, 2013, 725). This might then also prompt us to consider larger fissures within how the political is framed in Cairo—which Abourahme identifies in differing
energies of a “will to revolt” that took place through street protest and an “art of presence” in the everyday-lived spatialities of Cairo (2013, 727). This not only challenges framing around conceptions of “bodies in alliance” (Butler, 2011)—which cannot account for such differentiations—but more importantly allows us to think through more complex ways to bring together these differing imaginaries.

As such, by following different pathways that the image opens up to beyond its set power relations, this might at times mean moving further away from previous forms of imagining subjectivity—or else returning to them much later and on significantly different terms. This reading of Karim offers one potential way of tackling the myriad of questions that emerge from urban conditions of throwntogetherness, using the complexities of urban everyday-lived spaces as intersecting forces to think through how and why people may not always form a bodied alliance over the same political imaginaries. It is also a way of maintaining the question of difference that marks subjectivities such as Karim’s while nevertheless recognizing “the knotty ambiguities of everyday urban life, knowing full well that the epistemological ground is shifting beneath our feet all of the time” (Simone and Pieterse, 2018, 15). This turn to ambiguities and shifting grounds is thus a question of how other key concepts through which we define the political subject might need to be set in motion as well, such as Karim’s contestation to Al Shamy’s assumption that the agency of protest is the only way to think through the political in this context.

For if we mainly agree with Azoulay that “the photograph is not political in itself except to the extent that people make it exist among themselves, in plurality, in public” (2012, 59), how do we nevertheless need to rethink how this existing “among themselves” is casted in relation to everyday-lived spaces of Cairo, and how exactly are we defining “public” here in a particular spatiotemporal context where visible forms of public polity have only continued to decrease in the past decade? In the final section of this chapter, I begin to
respond to such questions by thinking more formally through how urban space intersects with our definitions of the political as a node of existence built around subjective action. As such, I turn to the experimental film Cairography (2013) to consider how we might contest and further contextualize recent theoretical framing around political subjectivity in the city via its most readily visible spatial contexts in conversation with Simone’s (2012) conception of “screens.” Here I especially note a divergence between Paul Amar’s (2013) reading of the political through subjective agency and the urban theoretical framework that I continue to use to address underlying layers of the political everyday.

III - Seeing in the shadows of downtown

In one of the narrow streets within the larger downtown area, a group of roughly ten people walk slowly and in unison. The camera is placed above the street, looking down. A truck beeps as it passes by the group, most likely because they are taking up a larger portion of the road than pedestrians normally allot themselves. Two women walking in the opposite direction move onto the sidewalk to avoid them. Another car approaches as the different members of the group look up in different directions. The car beeps, and the shot switches: the camera is now being held upside down, roaming through a different section of downtown Cairo and offering us a flipped image of the sidewalk with pedestrians walking on it, a parked car with a man leaned up against it on the side of the road, and cars passing by on the street. We cut back to the group on the narrow street, who turn their heads and continue to walk forward in unison (Hassan and Naous, 2013).

Cairography (2013), a collaboration between filmmaker Kinda Hassan and choreographer Dalia Naous inspired by their experiences as Lebanese women living in Cairo, is especially attentive to how material spaces across the city are recast by people who disrupt
the most mundane of social rhythms on the street. This moment, for instance, slows the
motion of how people normally walk through this area, re-negotiates the physical space
usually allotted to pedestrians, and reframes what form individuals take in relation to one
another in the city. More focally to the point I intend to make in this section, however, is that
rather than provide set ideas about the subjectivities that we see on screen, this moment
instead serves to immediately reframe our perspective on the city as a material-lived space:
the flip of the camera that makes us as viewers work just a little harder to figure out where we
are and what forms appear before us. That this is produced by the physical coming together
of these subjects in a small group offers another contestation to the question of collectivity
while providing even more context to the reading of urban space that accompanies this
contestation.

I wonder, then, what challenges such images provide when we return to Paul Amar’s
(2013) work on new forms of policed securitization experienced in the urban global south,
and of which Cairo emerges as one of the most “hypervisible” (15) examples. What I am
most interested in is how his reading of the political rests on a new conception of subjectivity:

parahumanization refers to a notion of humanized security where rights-bearing subjects of the state become suspects under the control of privatized rescue industries. My use of para-
represents my attempt to systematize the pervasive transnational vernacular use of terms like shadow, shade, ghost, specter, or phantom, which expressively capture the illiberal dimensions of security governance today. (Amar, 2013, 18)

In attempting to schematize such terminology, defining subjectivities from the vantage point
of the disciplinary powers that enact violence on them, Amar actually moves us further away
from how these terms help us understand subjectivities co-existent to such powers—and,
more to the point, otherwise to the spaces where they become most visible. This ultimately
returns us back to the space of Tahrir and the question of collective political agents rather
than allowing the stakes of his project to spread to other spatial contexts and underlying
political framings.
What, for instance, does a concept such as “shadows” differently perform for us alternative to Amar’s focus on hypervisibility? Ferguson (2006) insists that “there is more to the prevalent ‘shadow’ imagery than simply darkness or poor visibility. Beyond mere uncertainty or lack of clarity, the ‘shadow’ idea usually also implies also [sic] a kind of doubling” (his emphasis; 16). His argument is grounded around knowledge production of Africa as inattentive to the specificities of different African contexts that co-exist with larger global narratives built on what is most easily identifiable about the continent. To expand on this further, the shadow also connotes a spatial relation wherein the light is casted on what it first comes in contact to, which then casts a shadow onto what is right beside or behind it. This ultimately creates a constitutive relation between what is contacted by the light and what is not. If Tahrir remains the space where the light first hits, and the subjectivities that emerged in this space are our ultimate political end goal, how might this be further challenged by acknowledging the co-existence of “shadowed” spaces around Tahrir and how they might help us recast our perspective on those who dwell among them?

*Cairography* stages multiple performative acts in the immediate areas surrounding Tahrir: on the corniche right below the 6th of October bridge, behind the Egyptian museum, on one of the alleys that shoot off from Talaat Harb street, and in the confines of balconies and rooftops that overlook the downtown area. Beyond the physical ways light is casted in these areas, we might consider these shadowed spaces in terms of how they have not assumed the same sort of iconographic status as Tahrir square itself but act instead as the material connections between this space and the surrounding city. The performances in *Cairography* emerged from “a 10-day workshop with dancers, working closely with them on recounting stories of their relation with Cairo’s streets” (Attalah, n.d.) to ultimately arrive at the images we see in the film. Its construction does not create any sense of narrative but rather splices and intercuts these different performances throughout, both maintaining their individual paths.
while nevertheless fusing them together in a simultaneously disruptive and generative manner.

I therefore invite us to consider how these performances might point us to Simone’s (2012) presentation of the screen as “the occasion through which residents suture together a different kind of connection with each other – one cut off from reliance on a particular way of making reference to each other’s lives” (214). Grounded in a perspective on urban space wherein “every place is the manifestation of multiple folds in which various potentialities of action, recognition and assemblage are differentially accessible to those affiliated to that place” (2012, 203), Simone builds from the visuality of screens to outline a more complex intersection of space and subjectivity in the urban global south. He works with the act of “setting screens” in the city because screens possess many sensual qualities including and beyond the visual, meaning that they are not only used to “frame” individuals in ways that refer to the various categories that define them but are also used by these same individuals to navigate the uncertainty and instability of the social (2012, 210). That this ultimately leads to a conception of subjects coming together not through collective interests or shared goals but rather a “suturing” together of connection means paying attention to the everyday interactions which more complexly frame how political subjectivity is performed in collaborative as well as occult ways—that if we track such everyday processes, we might not have to fall back on collective notions of subjectivity to think the political.

In one of the filmed performances in Cairogrophy, a young man stands in front of El Abd patisserie, closes his eyes, and begins to slowly spin in circles as people walk by—some stare, others make quick gestures to move out of his way, while others directly interact with him. One man grabs onto his shoulder and begins to speak to him. He seems to be concerned, perhaps telling him that this is inappropriate behavior for such a busy street, but we do not hear the dialogue. These performances of choreography are played over the interlay of a solo
cello performance with various sounds of the city—car horns, the rumble of crowds, etc.—and we instead watch as they seem to negotiate his disruptive presence on the street.

In another segment of the film, a young woman asks a stranger for a cigarette while she stands alone on the corniche. The camera roams around the space, momentarily capturing the faces of men who look at her, her stance as she looks down and runs her hand through her hair, men passing by on a motorcycle who again look at her, her standing and looking around, and a young girl walking with her father who also looks at her. She throws the cigarette on the ground after she finishes and begins to walk away as disembodied voices play over the various sounds of overlaid audio:

“The girl is smoking a cigarette” [“al-bint bitishrab sīgārah”].

“What girl?” [“bint īh?”].

The camera drifts away from her towards the area under the bridge where people are walking and cars are stuck in traffic on the street. The shot then cuts to a choreographed performance that takes place on a rooftop: this same young woman stands with her face turned away from the camera until two men start dragging her around, tossing and contorting her body as she narrates:

“In our cinema culture, the image of a girl standing up next to a light post asking someone to light up her cigarette, this is considered an invitation” [“mumkin baqá fī al-sīnamā bitā’atnā min zamān, ganb ‘umūd al-nūr lamma wāḥidah batawqaf, ‘mumkin tawilla’nī,’ dh da’wah li-ḥāgah thāniyah”] (Hassan and Naous, 2013).

These images reveal different layers of shadows that exist in this area of the city, questioning the very foundations of visibility and publicness through which we normally read the social—especially in the liminal position of public and private offered by the choreographed performance on the rooftop. These images speak to the slippery ground of the
everyday-lived, of the constant negotiations that emerge from the various interactions of people, spaces, and objects in different spaces of the city at different times.

The narration over the images on the rooftop also presents an uncertain mix of how the material and the discursive meet in people’s various traversals of the city—that historical cinema tropes themselves become something that is lived in the present everyday. Here we see that the young woman having smoked a cigarette on the corniche does not bring the type of gendered violence that is insinuated in the performed choreography, but this choreography rather highlights the unseen potentials for such forms of violence that might otherwise be read in the differential gazes of the passerbys on the corniche. As I go on to show in the following chapter, this co-existent framing of violence and potentiality in the urban is a particularly resonant way of thinking about the political everyday in Cairo otherwise to the frameworks which have previously guided our inquiries (see Abaza, 2016).

Ultimately, the experiments in Cairography are not attempts to dismantle—or even oppositionally name—power structures, though they also do not need to be read as replacing such tactics for their own. In the middle of the film, there is an image of a protest happening in Tahrir wherein a young man holds the sign: *it’s my right to live [min ḥaqī aʿīsh].* (Hassan and Naous, 2013). Rather each of these images might be used as fragments to think through certain questions of subjectivity and politics by using the “extremity of cities” that Massey has pointed to (2005, 159). The disruptions and their attendant negotiations in the film occur through the constitutive role of the street that may nevertheless be felt much more quickly than it might have been in social spaces where residents are more spread out. This all allows us to ask much more specific and guided questions as compared to the overarching question of the “crowds” with which this chapter began: where might we take such gestures of disruption without opposition, and might it demand a different pace than the quick bursts of street performance provided in Cairography? How might we rethink how people’s actions
and inactions occur in the spill-over of how spaces are differently used and how the material leaks into the discursive? How then can this change how we think about the political in contemporary Cairo?

As such, the next chapter attempts to move even further from the global political imaginaries through which I have framed this chapter to slow down the pace at which we think through the different layers of the political, framing everyday-lived spaces of Cairo with renewed purpose. If we are not necessarily trying to provide readings of collective subjectivities or agents of revolt, what perspectives on the political everyday in the city might we be able to offer? In particular, I want to attend to answering some of these questions by thinking through and with images that allow us to further open up to how certain subjects dwell in the shadowed spaces of Cairo. Here I might be able to more fundamentally address where we turn in our readings of everyday-lived urban spatialities as we continue to uproot current conceptions of the political as based around subjective action and inaction, at the same time unravelling underlying layers of the political that occur at “quieter” frequencies.
Chapter III – Framing and pacing the political everyday

It moves slowly up the doors, left ajar over the closed shutters beneath which a hint of light peeks from a small sliver made by their crooked stance over the floorboards. As it moves, more streaks of light poke through the gaps between the shutter’s ridges—ridges angled to bring in air while reducing as much as possible the light that nevertheless leaks inside.

The camera then switches direction, following this light through the glass window on the door to pass over Souad’s face as she sleeps. Her name is called, she turns to the other side as it crawls its gaze across the room where her mother stands, turns on the radio, walks slowly to the shutters—pauses as she looks over at Souad—then opens the doors to let the light flow in.

“Get up, come on...Souad!” [“māṭqūmī baqá…su’ād!”]. It shifts for a second and holds on the mother’s back, looking down at Souad whose shoulder pokes out from behind the balcony door as she continues to sleep. The title of the film appears on the shadows of the wall above her: coming forth by day [al-khūrūg lil-nahār] (Lotfy, 2012).

That some stay in bed, for Elysée Nouvet (2014), is an act that disrupts certain preconceptions around the political to which critical social theory is still quite stuck: “While Rancière and Agamben usefully unbound ideas of where and through whom political imagination can be reinvigorated….it is the body as symbol, the metaphysical body, rather than the living of bare life, that fuels or will fuel social transformation” (95). There are rather under-acknowledged levels of affect that emerge from the lived experiences of someone who, in Nouvet’s case, refuses to get out of bed to face another day of harsh labor despite the risks this decision places on her and her children. For Nouvet, this presents not a failure to live a political life but rather a different perspective from which we might approach the political
and expand the question of its attendant social transformations. In this way, her reading of the political through affect complements my turn from Amar’s (2013) look at agential subjects, pointing our attentions to the relative inaction of subjects who nevertheless contribute to our situated understandings of the political.

Yet we might still pause on how these opening shots of getting out of bed in Al-khurūg lil-nahār (2012) linger over the materialities of the space from which its subjects are framed, and what additional layers of meaning this attentiveness may offer. Why dwell on the closed shutters, this morning routine of opening the windows to let light inside, then repeated as the mother drifts across the dark salon? What do we make of this house as a space that wraps itself up in the most mundane of negotiations for how the outside world enters into the most private of spaces, or in other words how different people and objects dwell in the shadows of the public sphere?

Affect, after all, is also the guiding framework for Laura Marks’ (2015) work around the film, where she does not hesitate to place Al-khurūg within a problematic Deleuzian-Spinozan imaginary that spreads across disparate contexts within the Arabic-speaking world. Her reading of the film positions Souad’s experiences through “a gradual awakening of capacities for life, not exactly from within the young woman, but both within and without her, as though the film is present at her birth” (332). This theoretical vagueness—overstating intimacies with Souad’s life while simultaneously deferring its specificities to a larger, abstract call around the body’s potentialities—ultimately brings few questions of critical purchase to underlying tensions of the political that lurk within this particular Cairo context.

Filming for Al-khurūg was put on hold when the 2011 revolts took place across Egypt, and it therefore arrived in what was seen—and certainly felt as for many—a rather different epoch. While my work may attempt to trouble this “pre-” and “post-” revolutionary
imaginary by recognizing the filmic attentions to the mundane everyday that have long co-existed with a contemporary history of street protest, this was nevertheless an undeniably significant moment. That Souad then never arrives at Tahrir, taking us even further from this space and its attendant imaginaries than the previous conversations around Karim (2011) and Cairography (2013), is what opens up significant questions regarding urban space and the “quiet” registers of the political, in borrowing from Tina Campt (2017, 11).

Within the political discourse around this time, Talal Asad (2012) was also calling on a particular register of affect—this time fear—to consider what he perhaps harshly terms “the failure of most people to respond to the call for widespread civil disobedience” (294-5). Thus while he productively identifies a problematic homogenized popular imaginary that cannot account for minority communities, he never questions his own assumptions around street protest as the only imaginable form of political possibility. Abourahme (2013), however, significantly switches the critical focus otherwise to this question of affect as ultimately tied to street protest: “The revolts in Egypt have reconfigured the conversation, they have upended the given, but their failure to push on beyond the reoccurring re-enactment of rupture, beyond the negative, leaves them open to the redirected populism stumping them today” (721). As I have noted in my conversation on Karim, Abourahme marks a schism between a particular “politics of protest” focused on the space of the streets that has dominated another form of subjects assembling through a “politics of practice.” Here Abourahme turns to the space derogatorily referred to as the slums to highlight an ongoing “art of presence” (2013, 724), wherein the everyday assemblages of informal urban life are already recasting how urban space is used and governed as well as constantly shifting how the political is defined.

For the purposes of this chapter—and especially the moment in which this thesis is being written—the language of failure and the potential of a success that could have been
achieved are not necessarily what informs my work here. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, while political activists in Cairo continue to gather necessary energies of disruption in increasingly constraining contexts, the visual and the image have and will continue to remain important parts of these efforts. Certainly the works of Lina Khatib (2012) and Mona Abaza (2013, 2014) on forms of revolutionary art, and especially street graffiti, offer deep and contextual readings of how images play a constitutive role in how the political is defined, debated, and re-imagined in times of revolt.

At the same time, however, I continue to note that contemporary urban theory’s call to move our attentions further away from normative sites of political action and consider the co-constitutive role of the otherwise forms of living that already exist within cities is a novel gesture that has yet to be applied in a widespread or comprehensive manner in the Cairo context. This demands gestures not of replacing the reading of the political through revolt but rather unravelling underlying layers of thinking the political that inform such social experiences of rupture. By building on Abourahme’s work in this manner, I want to consider how we might continue to think through and with images of social spaces in Cairo within this particular turn to the political everyday. Moreover, I show how the complex readings of material spaces in contemporary urban theory challenge readings of the political everyday through affect such as Nouvet and Marks’.

I also pull from Abaza’s (2014, 2016) recent work on post-revolutionary visual cultures in Cairo, wherein she highlights the increasing precarity of definitive pathways towards change and political action. Despite the growth of artists during and after the revolution who have used visual art such as graffiti to disrupt and contest state power, she remains concerned about the constraining atmosphere within which such art is being created, which puts it at risk of being captured within neoliberal structures and contributing to the larger gentrification of the city (2014, 178). She similarly points to activists who remain
staunch in the need for violent struggle while also acknowledging how formal activist structures are becoming increasingly restricted by recent changes such as the new legal standards for NGOs (2016, 121-5). Within this changing context, she speaks of how questions of the political in the city are much more structured around *endurance*:

> It is an idea that merges with the notion of ‘assemblages’ and the novel emerging fluidities and blurring spatial borders in the cities of the Global South which, as AbdouMaliq Simone argues, address the notion of ‘uncertainty’ as becoming the core problematique of contemporary urbanism (Abaza, 2016, 115)

The call to energies of endurance here—especially as framed within the perspective of critical urban theory—is of significant note in a couple ways. Endurance immediately connotes the difficulty and hardship of a particular situation, what both Abaza (2016) and Simone (2016) might refer to as the co-existent violence that undergirds the consideration of potentiality within the city. This then brings us to the other connotation of endurance, which speaks to a slower temporality through which we might take the time to re-examine how questions of potentiality and the otherwise are recast in constraining contexts. The difficulty is of course how to balance this turn to potentials that is afforded by a pace of endurance without disregarding the undergirding violences of the context from which we speak.

This chapter, then, attempts to delve further into dynamics of the political everyday, and its attachments to a particular reading of space via urban theory, while maintaining such a balance. By first addressing the pace and perspective from which we might approach the political everyday as a generative concept with which to work, I highlight how an attentiveness to the material in the images of *Al-khurūg* allow us to challenge previous framings around the political everyday by Lebow and especially Marks’ work on affect. In particular, I look at how we might build on this framing of the image through spatial conceptions of secretion and spill-over from urban global south scholarship, allowing us to pivot from frameworks of subjective action and inaction to instead open to ever-changing and
contingent nodes of potentiality and violence in the politicized urban everyday. I then connect such a perspective to Tina Campt’s (2017) conception of “quiet” images as a way to reconsider the space of the home in the film as a particular node through which we can respond to the decreased access to publicness in Cairo today that questions how we approach the urban social. In unravelling such layers of the political everyday, I hope—as I turn in setting up the final chapter—to offer renewed modalities for reading the liminalities of public and private space in Cairo through our potentials for thinking through and with the image.

1 - Images that dwell and distract

That the everyday is political is a statement that can quite easily be turned empty—quickly wrapping complex experiences up into the same discourses—if the normative terms of what the political is and from where it is practiced are not troubled in a critical manner. Within the Cairo context, it of course becomes difficult to not slip into the desire of bringing everything back to its relation with the revolution. This is a consideration perhaps outside the bounds of Lebow’s (2016) ambitious visual anthropology project aimed to rethink the relationship between film and political revolution, but we might nevertheless pause over how exactly the focus on revolution spreads into a reading of the surrounding social: “Rather than taking a direct approach, filmmakers like Omara believe that in fact any film about Egypt today is in part a film about the revolution” (288). Our critical faculties to unravel what might be otherwise to revolution are potentially shrouded from this perspective, wherein just as easily as everything becomes political in the “rhizomatic emergent structure” to which Lebow’s online project builds (2016, 291), what might more meaningfully transcend normative ways of thinking the political becomes slightly harder to discern.
The stakes that I aim to develop may then become clearer with closer consideration of the work attached to the former quote: Marouan Omara and Johanna Domke’s *Qaṣ* (2012). The film is narrated from the perspective of a photojournalist hospitalized right before January 25th, 2011, who was therefore unable to cover the 18 days of revolt that the film mainly speaks about in relation to Tahrir square. This man’s narration is instead visualized through everyday scenes of *Al Ahram* newspaper office building. Through shots of people waiting for elevators, office boys bringing coffee to men in suits, and the stillness of empty conference rooms, we learn about this photojournalist’s intimacies with the newspaper and eventual departure to follow his passion to freelance, ultimately bringing us to the aftermath of the revolution.

While the meaning that we can read onto the images in *Qaṣ* is in no way limited to their connection with the narration that runs across the film, this nevertheless points to an interesting tension around which the film is built: though the film deliberately draws its spatial attentions away from Tahrir, the narration continues to posit a normative politic that quite clearly remains affectively attached to the square. Reading the history of *Al Ahram* through his father’s role as head photojournalist and his own work with and beyond the newspaper, the narrator recounts stories of political dynasties, the seemingly illogical allegiances of the poor to the state, and the binary crisis facing *Al Ahram* whether to follow the lead of the people in revolt or the new military rule. The images in *Qaṣ* are themselves guided by a roaming camera with compositions that neatly order and make symmetrical the spaces it visualizes, rarely pausing to dwell on or return back to a particular space or certain subjects before moving onto the next. Here we might nevertheless think through how these different images convey the life of the beaurocratic institution and the co-existence of a banal professional atmosphere with an ambivalent relationship to the state during a time when the popular image of the streets outside was one of violent disruption and disorder. Yet even
these productive pathways through which we can contextualize the images in Qas might not necessarily push the complexities of political subjectivity and the spatiotemporal that I have been following.

From where, then, might we differently think through and with the image to consider renewed ways of framing the political in this context? How might we more substantially work with different spatialities in Cairo as thought through alternative political registers without the risk of transposing them to sites of street protest? What, ultimately, does the focus on urban conditions of throwntogetherness that I outlined in the previous chapter offer in terms of operating otherwise to a reading of the political in relation to subjective action and inaction?

In responding to these questions, it is important to reiterate that the point here is not to necessarily provide a new definition of the political, nor even to tread social experiences that have not been addressed before—the turn away from energies of street protest, of course, is not in any way a singular argument. Rather, the particular perspective of current social theoretical frameworks on everydayness allows us to return to certain spatiotemporal and social contexts with renewed attentions and critical faculties from which otherwise potentials of framing the political might emerge. For instance, I recognize that Jessica Winegar (2012) has productively turned to experiences of the 18 days from a gendered perspective that was experienced in the home more so than on the streets. From a broader regional perspective, Shohat’s (1997) work on feminist Third-World cinema had also quite early identified how the depiction of women’s domestic experiences during times of revolt significantly challenged exclusions and violences undergirding masculinist energies of anticolonialism and national liberation movements. My intention here is to return to similar questions with greater attentiveness to how current theoretical work around the urban global south might allow us to
think, see, and sense such spatiotemporal and social contexts through a focus on the underlying layers of the political everyday.

*Al-khurūg* turns its attentions to a single day wherein Souad and her mother spend the morning taking care of the dying father, Souad goes out in the afternoon, her father’s case worsens, the mother has to take him to the hospital where she also works, and then Souad attempts to go home from the hospital at night but does not return until early morning the next day. Compared to a film such as *Qas*, there initially appears to be something almost apolitical in its lack of attention towards machinations of the state or other social structures of discipline within its presentation of the social in Cairo. Take, for instance, the bed-ridden, helpless father—shot often as though already in a coffin—who little resembles the figures of patriarchal power or masculine protectionism that have characterized many previous dramatizations of gender and nation in Egyptian cinema (see Shafik, 2007). This points to how questions of disciplinary power and violence, as well as potentiality and the otherwise, then emerge at less immediately visible registers.

Rather, we might consider how mundane elements such as the very slow drawl of the images over material spaces—how the camera hovers over nuanced details stitched not only within complicated interactions in different spaces around Cairo but also a curiously hesitant mobility across them—can open to renewed critical questions. The hesitance through which the film’s images might be placed into common discursive terrain—and the heaviness and burden felt most especially in the movement of the camera—are ultimately what allows us to pose the questions that *Al-khurūg* helps raise regarding the spatiotemporal and the political. We might consider how this resonates from an anthropological perspective with Ingold’s (1993) dwelling perspective, wherein “every feature…is a key to meaning rather than a vehicle for carrying it. This discovery procedure, wherein objects in the landscape become clues to meaning, is what distinguishes the perspective of dwelling.” (172). The particular
call for an embeddedness within particular spatiotemporal contexts and an attention to the complex and contingent assemblages of subjects, objects, and spaces are also what can ultimately allow us to develop a critical balance between specific everyday contexts and broader problematics within urban theory.

Over the sound of singers Farid Al-Atrash and Esmahan on the radio, the camera rests, framed tightly on Souad as she sifts through rice in a large platter on her lap. The camera begins to drift quite slowly across the bed and away from her, catching the thick layer of dust on the sun-drenched window of the balcony door. It then pauses and ever so slightly pivots up to pull focus towards the view outside: the building across the street—its roof piled with wood, trash, and satellite dishes—another, taller building blurred in the distance, and the glaring whiteness of the sun overtaking the sky. As the camera continues to crawl, the shot is framed by the balcony door, the shutter left ajar beside it, and a curtain pulled to the opposite side, its beige translucence covering certain parts of the view. Once again the camera pivots, this time slightly floating towards the outside. This is the only time within the first, extended passage of the film wherein the camera has moved its gaze physically outside the space of the home, and yet even in this blink of a moment, the bottom of the image is still framed with the material of the apartment: the balcony railing and a carpet thrown over it to dry in the sun. Not even a second passes and we are returned to an image shot inside the apartment, where the mother and daughter argue over the presence of Souad’s cousin who has just left (Lotfy, 2012).

These images, and especially the languid pace with which they float through the screen, can also be seen as opening up to what Taussig (1991) refers to as “a knowledge that lies as much in the objects and spaces of observation as in the body and mind of the observer” (147). Borrowing from Taussig’s language again, there is a sense of distraction here wherein the different materials of the home and the view outside catch the camera’s attention and
produce their own meanings that are nevertheless tied to the intersecting spatiotemporal contexts cutting across the home and the view of the city outside. As the camera may go on to immerse its spatial attentions much more centrally within the multiplicities outside of the home, the idea of fully leaving behind this space in this context—its attachments, burdens, and struggles—is upended by the hesitance towards how, when, and by whom different spaces are traversed.

Yet I recognize that there are also significant theoretical risks in terms of how readings of the image might be opened up to academic gazes in this manner, which my turn to material space within a particular global south perspective attempts to navigate. This same moment in Al-khurūg, in fact, is also curiously the scene in the film that Marks (2015) focuses on to argue that the camera achieves Pasolini’s concept of free-indirect discourse, a poetic mobility that goes beyond an objective or subjective point of view and which sets up her ultimate framing around affect. For Pasolini, film’s creation of meaning through images, and the relative freedom of images from a semiotic system of closed possibilities, means that it assumes a poetic quality as a style of transferring meaning that transcends common understandings of subjective and objective points of view. Free indirect discourse ultimately marks how “the author penetrates entirely into the spirit of his character, of whom he thus adopts not only the psychology but also the language” (Pasolini, 1967, 546). This marks one of the key distinctions in how I frame my approach to the image, as discussed in Chapter II, wherein the openness that I attempt to bring out does not occur at a more abstract level of the filmmaker’s relationship to the subjects depicted in the film but rather in relation to the embeddedness of specific images within the particular spatiotemporal and political contexts from which they emerge. To seriously consider such easy transcendence from Souad’s particular experience to a more collective one based around the body’s potentialities elides
the deeper layers underlying this particular Cairo context from which I have been discussing the film.

This also means that there are more significant fissures in terms of how the political is addressed within our different readings of the film. Marks ultimately adheres to a Spinozan political framing that focuses on affected and affective bodies, which she especially reads through the “struggle to attain adequate ideas, Baruch Spinoza’s term for ideas that express a body’s capacity to act” (Marks, 2015, 307). How, however, might this framing risk reifying certain universalizing gestures within studies of the global south? We might think, for example, of Hardt and Negri (2000), who point to a future “exodus” from disciplinary structures through the Spinozan idea of creating “a new social body” (204). Scheuller (2009) argues that this framing is “supported by a temporal logic that both privileges and appropriates the present…. And in this present network, all struggles since the 1990s are ‘new’ struggles of a multitude against the empire of global capital” (239). In other words, we see that their deep attentions to the new machinations of disciplinary powers, such as supranational structures like neoliberal capital and the UN system, at the same time reify a sense of newness onto the potential forms of life that might allow us to think otherwise to these powers. This is directly opposed to decolonial theory’s focus on the “paradigm of co-existence” (Mignolo, 2009), which acknowledges the diverse local histories containing a multitude of epistemologies that have always co-existed otherwise to the logic of the colonial matrix of power. How then can we use the recent insights of scholars of the urban global south to reinscribe these critical insights around shadows and co-existences into our interactive readings of images? How, ultimately, might we more generously account for what has already existed but at a less visible level, for the underlying layers that have always contributed to social experiences if not always legible within certain theoretical frameworks?
When placed together, these ruminations on how filmic images both have been and can be positioned in relation to the political everyday in Cairo demand a different theoretical framing for the conversations that I have begun with Al-khurūg. As I have attempted to set up in this section, there is a much slower path to be built out in tracking different images in the film that do not directly point us to questions of the state, disciplinary power, and the normative political, offering instead an openness from which we might nevertheless explore the city in a critical and discerning manner.

II - Mosques, microbuses, and spill-over spaces

Souad entering a microbus cuts to water spilling onto the tile floor of the apartment, the mother lowering down onto her knees to scrub the floors with a towel. We never see Souad get out of the microbus but rather watch the mother emerge from a sliver of light coming from the bathroom to play Oum Kalthoum’s “We wronged love” [“ẓalāmnā al-ḥubb”] as she lays next to her husband. And Souad crossing the street after a failed rendezvous with a young man sends us back to the darkness of the home once the sun has set—and a thud of the father falling onto the floorboards (Lotfy, 2012). The supposedly private space of the home continues to seep into Souad’s traversal of different publics, pointing us to how they themselves might be read with renewed purpose.

That spaces seep, spill-over, and secrete—as urban theory in particular has recently argued—upends several of the normative tenants through which the spatiotemporal and the political have been thought. We might then turn to think through how the different publics in Al-khurūg can be read as multiply-navigated spaces that, especially through the camera’s attentiveness to materialities, open us up to a different framing around the political. Here I attempt to bring the conversations that I have begun with Ingold and Taussig into the folds of
the urban global south, not merely highlighting a certain pace and attention to the material as end goals in themselves but rather as invitations towards a more critical engagement with complex social readings that might recast how we approach the politics of urban space.

Secretion is an especially important concept for Simone and Pieterse (2018) in their move away from a bounded view of urban spaces, showing instead how they are always multiply lived by subjects who negotiate their visibility and participation in different ongoing circulations. One of the most compelling strategies that they propose for unravelling such fluidities is re-descriptions: rather than reify what modern structures dictate about urban spaces and socialities—or provide a single definition of how the space is conversely used in resistance to these structures—they encourage us to re-describe intersecting spatial, temporal, and social contexts with a focus on how different ways of thinking the urban might emerge.

While urban developers and state powers may see the market in Jakarta as merely a space for trading, re-describing the space with attention to its everydayness proves how “markets are sites for proselytization, prophecy, exegesis, rumour, speculation, conviviality, entertainment, mobilization, and networking….So markets are always spilling over from their established confines” (Simone and Pieterse, 2018, 91).

Their work here relates to a larger political project built around altering the structures and logic of urban development to incorporate how spaces are read by the everyday people and objects that multiply navigate and produce them—that these levels of experience are where the possibilities for understanding the excesses and possibilities in different spaces lie. In line with my work in Chapter II, this perspective on space also allows us to move beyond a conception of subjective collectivity and towards how spaces might differently open up and close possibilities to the various subjects who traverse them. It provides what they refer to as “an epistemic point about what the possible implications might be to take seriously both the banal and occult folds of everyday urbanism” (Simone and Pieterse, 2018, 114), delving
further into the contradictions and uncertainties inherent to urban experience that Abaza has highlighted as particularly relevant to the contemporary political context in Cairo (2016, 115).

Take, for instance, how Al-Hussein mosque figures for Souad and those with whom she is surrounded there in Al-khurūg. Coming directly from the hospital where her father lies idly, his condition seemingly worsening, Souad argues with her taxi driver over paying extra fare, telling him she only has one guinea with which to get home. She enters, loosely adorns the headscarf given to her, and walks past a group of children running around in hushed laughter, women sitting on the floor reading, and others slouched on chairs looking off in thought. A worker in front of her is sweeping the floor as Souad meekly walks through, pausing to let by a woman who enters with a quicker pace, perhaps more purpose of where she is headed (Lotfy, 2012).

The different experiences that can exist within this space—both in terms of the scope and speed of their material traversal as well as the spiritual comforts and awakenings that they may or may not be produced—demand that the mosque be re-described beyond a singular understanding of how it functions within Cairo’s diverse socialities. It is as part of the mosque’s openness, which includes the interactions among spiritual connection, play, ponder, and labor, that Souad enters as she herself reads and navigates the space. Standing at the shrine of Imam Hussein, her face reads lost and without conviction relative to the women beside her who close their eyes, heads down at their clasped hands as they perhaps whisper prayers, ask for help, or seek protection of a loved one.

This moment moreover serves as a reminder that everyday spaces and the people and objects within them deny as much as they might offer positive affective experiences, and this ultimately emerges as a disconnected experience for Souad as she alternates her conflicted gaze up at the structure in front of her and over to the women beside her before giving up her
place to someone else. This is perhaps her own way of reading the space to, in the spirit of Simone’s (2012) conception of screens, “try on different ways of being in the city ‘on for size’” (209) in a particularly desperate moment. Yet there is no unified experience guaranteed to her: this is emphasized by the static gaze of the camera which only sets back in motion once the film has cut to the street outside, turning its gaze in a circle as it takes in a nearby café, a bridge ramp, the street with a fence through the middle, and finally Souad sitting on the curb. The disconnection she experiences in the mosque is also something curiously ingrained within the materiality of the shrine that looms over her in the frame, containing not the body of Al-Hussein in whole but rather his decapitated head.

This particular spill-over of the material-lived into the realm of the symbolic-political is, for Abourahme (2015), an aspect of the everyday-lived that contains significant possibilities for rethinking constraining political contexts. In looking at an overly-theorized spatiality such as the refugee camp, he highlights how the materiality of cement is actually productive of the political actions of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and the assemblages of their everyday lives. Abourahme offers a reading of space that is set apart from affect-oriented readings, which tend to either strictly separate the representational realm or reify abstract notions of space. He calls instead that we “follow this most banal of materials and uncover how it mediates action, and ultimately even subjectivities, in ways not at all directly causal, instrumental or clearly representational” (2015, 4).

This perspective ultimately offers a significant contestation regarding how we might move away from an awakened, agential political subject: “the constitutive elements of changing subjectivity are in the irresolvable tensions between these poles, in the cleft between these figures” (2015, 14). It is not merely that so-called passivity is no less political as activity but rather that we must question the overwhelming focus on the body that does or does not act, such as how Nouvet’s turn to Grosz’ conception of micro-agencies (Nouvet,
2014, 85) still recasts her main problematic within the same epistemic framework built around the primacy of the subject. The challenge posed here is to use space and the co-constitutive nodes of the material to consider more deeply the complex, changing textures of thinking the political in situated contexts.

In *Al-khurūg*, I turn to work through the role that the material spatial contexts of microbuses play at different symbolic-political levels. The microbus is a particular form of working-class mobility built around informal lines that formal public transportation generally does not cover. We might position them within von Wissel’s (2016) conception of “liquid architecture” (1067), noting the fluidity of stopping, embarking, waiting, and communicating that marks such forms of mobility in the city. When Souad first boards a microbus in the morning, a disruptive conversation occurs between her and another young woman, where minute collisions of class and gender, and also of religion and superstition, occur surrounded in the cramped atmosphere of the bus. The faces of men sitting behind them—seeming to intermittently tune in and out of paying attention to their speech—also differently come in and out of focus of the camera. The undeniably gendered dynamics of microbuses are also what has positioned them as well-known sites where harassment and assault occurs—a potential that Souad reads on a different microbus going to Al-Sayyida Aisha from Al-Hussein late at night.

The door slides open, and a couple carrying their baby get out, seen barely lit through the window at which Souad sits. The camera pans behind her back, opening out towards the empty microbus. As the bus turns, the camera shifts position, latching onto the exterior of the bus. Its gaze both looks in at Souad—in front of whom the driver’s face appears glancing at her in the mirror—and runs across the side of the microbus and out onto the street.

“What did you change the route?” [“intā ghayart ṣarīqak ḫīḥ?”].

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He claims there is a checkpoint and that he does not have his license. They pass figures on
the street who reach their arms out.

“Why didn’t you stop for them?” [“intā mawiqift-lihumsh līh?”].

His shift has ended, he tells her, and he will take her then go home. They continue, and she
begins yelling when he even passes by an old man calling for Al-Sayyida Aisha, only for him
to kick her out of the bus altogether.

“Take your guinea—here, get out, get out!” [“khudī al-ginīh bitāʾīk...ahū, itfaḍīlī! itfaḍīlī!”]
(Lotfy, 2012).

The threat of assault here is read not only through the gaze of the driver and the emptiness of the bus but more focally Souad’s immediate reaction to the smallest of changes in the physical path and attentiveness to passerbys on the street. Her so-called “activeness” over the situation is itself dependent on the materiality of how a microbus moves and for whom, which is also not to discredit the real violences that occur in such spaces as some passivity caused by a refusal to react as such. The point here is that the ground under which such confrontations occur is constantly slipping and unpredictable, as in the reaction of the driver to kick her out despite the power—coming from her very presence inside the bus—that we assume he wants to wield. Within the political context of gendered violence and access to the city, such moments resonate with questions raised regarding how activist models built around safety might further inhibit women’s mobility throughout cities of the urban global south and thereby reify structures of violence (Phadke, 2007; 2013). Key to this is that we highlight how the specific materials of the spaces in which subjects are immersed constitute action, inaction and their in-betweens, recasting contingency and uncertainty’s vital place within the fabric of political contexts.

This particular attentiveness to everyday experience emerges from a visualization at once within and around a particular confined space as thought through specific intersections
of people and objects rather than relative to discursive narratives of state and patriarchal power. This begins here with the intimate placing of the camera latched on the bus—dually taking in its interconnected interior and exterior—through which we are able to find an expansive vantage point from which to consider an undeniably constraining experience in a fluid, relational, and context-dependent manner. Within the larger Cairo context, again this is not a discredit to the more visible and explosive political gesturing of, for example, women who have continually taken to the streets despite the constant risk and actualization of sexual violence. Yet it should be acknowledged how critical theoretical works that so fully center their attentions on these experiences, such as Amar’s (2013), can become so focused on rejecting liberal and neoliberal forms that they disconnect almost entirely from the everyday assemblages which had and continue to inform these moments of protest.

As such, paying attention to the particular kind of gendered violence seen in Al-khurūg allows us to connect the experiences in Amar’s work to a long-standing and contingent relationship to violence that undergirds the urban experience in this context. Simone (2016), for instance, has argued against a particular reliance on the aesthetic in social analyses of violence, wherein “social life is purged of anything that is uncertain or ambiguous, that can’t be made visible” (16). Here our reading of the image instead opens up to the uncertain and the ambiguous with particular respect to complex relationships of power, subjectivity, and material space in Cairo.

Moreover, by expanding how we think about violence in this specific everyday context—one that is intimately attached to mobility across the city—it also allows us to challenge readings of the urban social as purely open to constant movement and circulation, a perspective which disregards the hindrances to mobility differentially experienced in the city. How, furthermore, might this perspective allow us to think through significantly more
constraining political contexts wherein the particular mobilities across public space that have majorly defined the political are now increasingly less available of an option?

As I turn to the next section, the question is also raised regarding how to deal with the liminalities of public and private space that emerge within changing notions of the political specific to this contemporary Cairo context. Here we might return to the space with which my discussion of the film began—the home—to consider different approaches to reading the social within the Cairo context through Campt’s framing around the “quiet.”

**III - Quiet registers of the home**

To begin this discussion on images of the home, I feel I must also acknowledge that while the attentions of urban theory and *Al-khurūg* productively converge in the various moments that I have so far highlighted—affinitively unravelling how the political is contingent on a number of intersecting social and spatiotemporal factors—at other times these images might take us further from the general tendencies of urban theory. This is something that I am interested in confronting, not necessarily in terms of marking the relative limits—or alternately the grand extent—of the image in contributing to urban theory but rather as a marker of how the paths opened by the images in *Al-khurūg* are decidedly distinct and emerge from a potential attentiveness to facets of lived experience which urban theory may sometimes spend less time thinking through.

Urban theory is especially attached to projects of thinking cities as continuously mobile and changing in counterpoint to violent forms of disciplinary control and stabilization. Its attentions are mainly placed on informal publicness as already existing forms of life whose politics rest on their ever-changing functioning despite continual precarity. *Al-khurūg* instead offers what is at face value just an individual story of a certain experience in the city
that, despite opening to an affinitive presentation of space and the political that I pull out here, may not always transfer to the noise, excess, and infrastructural force of the everyday urban as thought through this particular strand of theory. Yet it is exactly the project of this thesis to take up what this perspective—these attentions towards certain spaces and experiences as presented in the particular sensory readings brought forth by the image—might differently offer to current conversations within the urban field.

What then does *Al-khurūg’s* focus on the home space to which I have continually referred offer to the relative publicness of urban theory’s current attentions? Might it thereby open up to how these spatialities differently engage us in the slippery ground on which the political lies? How might this expand on the seeming interest for a particular sort of publicness in relation to how we read politics that does not properly reflect the extraordinary violences to public life occurring in Cairo today?

As the home has long been thought in terms of a fixed and stable conception of bounded interiority, urban theory has been consistently more interested in setting the home and household as mobile. Take for instance Simone and Pieterse’s interest in an area of Jakarta “where buildings snake around each other, twist and turn their walls and spaces in ways where it is difficult to tell whose place is whose, where the entrances and exits of a specific household unit might be” (2018, 99). While this setting mobile of stable categories remains an important academic effort, and though urban theory has certainly developed nuanced ways to understand how mobility is differentiated in relation to changing contexts and positionalities, how might the seemingly more mundane aspects of the physical home merit more consideration? We might also think about this in the context of a different claim made by Simone (2016): “Now urban life is increasingly a challenge to seize or be seized, to act in the immediacy of the moment where distinctions between public and private, ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘now’ and ‘then’ are increasingly provisional” (21). The turn to the home can
then point us to a liminality between private and public space that aids us in reworking our readings of the social in contexts with decreased access to visibly political forms of publicness.

It is therefore important to first note that the images of the home in Al-khurūg do not at all have to be read in relation to insularity or protection from the hostilities of the social. As Chakrabarty (2008), for instance, turns to the home in Provincializing Europe as a space for differently thinking through processes of modernization and co-existent temporalities, I am interested in how we might take the attentions on the home in these images as a humble point from which to more distinctly think through underlying layers of the political that allow us to contest current notions of publicness in the city.

The home in the images of Al-khurūg is never disconnected from the supposed outside, seen first in what certainly are mundane details of open windows and balconies that are also deeply connected to how Souad, her mother, and this space all interact with one another. The two women often gaze through these openings throughout the film, whether when Souad sits by herself in contemplation or when the mother is asked by Souad after her ultimate return home in the morning:

“Where will we bury Dad? Where is our grave site?” [“hanadfan bābā fin’? al-madāfin bitā’atnā fin’?”].

The mother does not immediately respond but rather stares outwards while running her hands through the mattress fluff she has picked apart in a desperate attempt to alleviate the discomfort the bed causes her husband (Lotfy, 2012).

The home is also a space that speaks through its very architecture: the multiple rooms the film frames at once, never fully closed off from one another but just the same never fully open given the presence of the thin separating walls—or the salon and bedroom doors that
variously hang open. There is significant fluidity and uncertainty undergirding the spatiotemporal contexts of the home here, if not quite setting objects and subjects in motion in the manner through which we normally read the urban social.

That this house is a space which can offer quieter, perhaps more contemplative everyday experiences—though certainly not without its own disruptions, such as in the interruption caused by the visit of Souad’s cousin—is an important distinction from the louder rhythms of urban publics. As Tina Campt (2017) wonders in her look at various contexts of Black visual cultures:

What is the relationship between quiet and the quotidian? Each term references something assumed to go unspoken or unsaid, unremarked, unrecognized, or overlooked. They name practices that are pervasive and ever-present yet occluded by their seeming absence or erasure in repetition, routine, or internalization. Yet the quotidian is not equivalent to passive everyday acts, and quiet is not an absence of articulation or utterance. Quiet is a modality that surrounds and infuses sound with impact and affect, which creates the possibility for it to register as meaningful. (4)

I posit that the particular visual approach to the home—in its connections to different publics—throughout Al-khurūg opens to the contemplations of a quieter everyday-lived that, as Campt shows, is not about the erasure of noise and excess for easier readings of the social world but rather different attentiveness towards figuring otherwise ways of thinking the political. Putting this together with Abaza’s (2016) use of endurance, for quiet modalities to register as meaningful means placing them within particular contexts that are not in any way “new” but where they are able to inform and deepen how we tap into less visible, yet still long-standing nodes of social experience. It also allows us, as I show in the following reading, to return more critically to the question of affect through Campt’s conception of the “affective labor of images” (2019b, 27).

Combined with the focus I have developed regarding material space, the relative quiet of the home opens to fundamental negotiations about the very act of going out that might
normally go unseen and unnoticed: the simplicity of a daughter asking her mother a mundane question to her unconvincing response, which distils a precarious economic situation at odds with the relatively middle-class home within which they live.

“Did you get bread?” [“gībtī ‘aīsh?”].

“No, the bakery was too crowded” [“lā, al-fūrn kān zaḥmah”] (Lotfy, 2012).

The moment is undeniably enriched by the affective gestures of the pauses through which they speak and how, more often than they make eye contact, they turn their heads slowly and look out or over, leaving space perhaps to think and negotiate on the words in diverging ways. Moving outward from such small moments, the specificity of this space also opens us up to different temporalities of nostalgia, dread, recollection, and aspiration that co-exist in the various material acts of getting up, listening to Oum Kalthoum or Farid Al-Atrash and Esmahan, cleaning the father’s wounds, changing his sheets, or even just looking out the window. All of these colliding textures make this particular context of confronting the public sphere a more burdensome and charged task: in other words, these moments of how private spaces leak into our understandings of the urban public also deeply contribute to how we might reframe the polity of publicness.

This turn to affect, then, is grounded in a different manner than the framing provided by Marks or Nouvet—and it is necessarily brought about by the slower pace at which I have worked with the specific spatiotemporalities, materialities, and subjects that intersect in these images. As Campt states: “still-moving images demand our affective labor through their capacity to touch or move us and through the labor they require to manage, refuse, or deny their affects” (2019b, 27). By highlighting the latter gestures in particular, affects are characterized as much by their risks as their potentials—as relatively open elements of the image that are certainly important to how we engage it, but also as nodes through which we can reject the ability to overstep how the people, objects, and spaces in the image are
transposed in ways that do not account for the burdens of a particular social and political context.

It may take significant work, obviously beyond the scope of conversations opened by the images of this one film, to draw back to even as legible of a conception of the political as Souad’s experience in the microbus offers, but is the openness of the film’s images to such particular forms of mundanity not allowing us to say something in itself about fundamental, fleeting negotiations that hover over what underlies different contexts of publicness and their attendant political implications? I would thus ultimately like to consider what exactly this turn to the home and the quiet does within the Cairo context, particularly given the resonance that a turn to relatively private spatialities brings to what has been occurring this past year.

As I discussed in Chapter I, the September 2019 protests, the resulting thousands of arrests that quite understandably stunted calls to take to the streets the following Friday, and the many disciplinary practices around the city but most especially the current effacement of Tahrir square’s spatial ordering mark social environments where the polity of publicness is increasingly less available of a position. I do not pull from these recent occurrences to somehow make the claim that this film and these particular arguments around space and the home provide the answer to the violence of such a situation, yet this all may nevertheless mark a moment based more so on gestures of gathering together and reconsidering how publicness is—and more importantly always was and has been—negotiated in different spaces across Cairo. That the image might offer particular ways of differently thinking these experiences is thus one of many potential paths for reimagining a more fluid and contextual conception of the political today.

I attempt to bring together these different strategies and modalities built throughout this chapter, as well as previous ones, for my final analysis in Chapter IV. In especially
building on the argument around engaging the “quiet” registers of the image in relation to the political everyday, I move to position what the particular creative and critical approach towards thinking through and with the image in this context performs in intervening into the larger conversations around sensory engagement in anthropology with which I began the prologue to this thesis.
Chapter IV – Eavesdropping on the social

The camera rests on an image of a tree, its various branches and leaves filling the shot as they rustle lightly in the breeze. We hear a roll of wind coming in among the emergence of different voices, of which only a phrase or two is discernible.

“Hey kitty, look here…take a picture…” [“yā qaṭah buṣī hinā…ṣawwar…”].

This is followed by a rumble of mainly indiscernible speech that grows in volume. In the image, a white bird stands on a branch, moving its head around, as a young woman’s voice comes through distinctly, with a strange closeness, as if she is whispering.

“Shooting stars remind me of eavesdroppers” [“al-nugūm bitfakarī bil-mutanāṣṣītīn”].

We hear another woman speaking among this cascade of noises—her voice is noticeably louder than the young woman who continues to whisper.

“Word snatchers, when you see a shooting star in the sky, know that someone was prevented from listening in on you” [“khaṭṭāfīn al-kalām, lammā tishūf shuhub fī al-samā i’rif inn fī ḥadd biyatmana’ min al-tagassīs ‘alayk’”].

As she whispers this, the voice of the other woman cuts through her words.

“You’re joking, man…you’re joking!” [“bithazar, yā gada’…bithazar”].

The white bird sitting in the frame flies up to another branch, only its tail visible in the top corner of the image (Maamoun, 2013).

The disconnections of sight and sound that characterize the opening frames of Maha Maamoun’s *Al-shuhub tudhakirūnī bil-mutanāṣṣītīn* (2013) in many ways bring us back to her work in *2026* (2010) on which this thesis project began: we hear disembodied voices of subjects who we do not immediately—and this time will never—see; we look at images for which we have relatively little context beyond the material details before us; and yet it is through these very refusals to visualize that we are then asked to differently attune our sensory readings of the social spaces in which these images are embedded. In this case, I
especially note how the similarities in approaching the image across these two films move with the trajectory of this thesis from gesturing to the present everyday in 2026 to an immersion within a specific everyday-lived context in *Al-shuhub*: that of Cairo’s Al-Azhar park.

In particular, I am interested in noting how *Al-shuhub*, building on my conversation on quietness in relation to Campt, calls more strongly on sensibilities of hearing both in our process of viewing the film and within the images themselves. The embedded layers of these images bring out a keen interest in acts of listening, especially within contexts where the knowledge that one gathers relates to what one hears without necessarily seeing the person who is speaking. It calls to how the urban visual field is also almost always immersed in an aural landscape filled with excesses of sounds that alternately work together and cut through one another—and especially where the utterance of one’s words rests precariously within the liminality of remaining private and being made public. By then bringing together the interventions around subjectivity and the political everyday from previous chapters, I think through and with *Al-shuhub*’s images of eavesdropping in Al-Azhar park to ultimately frame the critical intervention this thesis project provides into current anthropological discourse around a “sensorial turn” (Elhaik, 2016, 28) overwhelmingly focused on the creative potential of the image.

As explained in the prologue to this thesis, my method of thinking through and with the image has been fundamentally inspired by the work of anthropologists who convened at the 2015 *Image as Method* symposium: their creative approaches not only confirmed my commitment to the filmic image as an equally powerful tool of social theoretical analysis as ethnography but also allowed me to expand my work beyond set readings of these images to think more deeply through their relation both to larger imaginaries within social theory and their embedded social contexts. This was an important step to take in terms of how I might
use images of a more expansive and discerning understanding of everyday-lived spaces in Cairo to contest and further contextualize a global imaginary of political subjectivity as well as read underlying layers of the political in the image through direct conversation with urban theoretical conceptions of secretion and spill-over spaces.

Yet as I explained in Chapter I, the reason why I have chosen to work more formally with the methods of visual culture scholars Azoulay (2012) and Campt (2017, 2019a, 2019b) in the previous chapters largely rests on this question of creativity—more specifically, that these latter two scholars simultaneously engage a criticism of the image in relation to embedded contexts of coloniality and power. These are the elements of their works that first sparked connections with my reading of 2026—built more fundamentally on the refusals that must first be considered before moving to gestures of creativity and generation—and which then led to my working through simultaneously critical and creative readings of the image in Chapters II and III. By setting such methodologies in dynamic conversation with current trends of urban theory, I have ultimately arrived at renewed readings of diverse social spaces in Cairo that maintain a critical hesitance towards how we situate and qualify our abilities to creatively think the otherwise in Cairo.

Within recent turns to the image in anthropology, however, sensory forms of thinking through and with the image and the larger imagistic seem to carry with them an a priori—or at least relatively undiscussed—transcendence of disciplinary power: in other words, with the right intentions and sensibilities, one can seem to almost definitively arrive at readings of the otherwise. Take, for instance, Lisa Stevenson’s (2014) claim that “drawing our anthropological attention back to imagistic rather than discursive modes of knowing will allow us to consider a whole range of seemingly contradictory experiences that have too often gone unexamined” (10). The imagistic is cast here as almost entirely separate from discursive forms of academic knowledge production, and in so doing, she regrets to acknowledge the
leakage of the discursive—and attendant reifications of power and inequalities—into even the most well-intentioned sensory readings of the social through and with the image. This has been a particularly important qualification to make in my work when engaging the affective framing of film scholars such as Laura Marks, and it resonates with Tarek Elhaik’s larger contestation of the “‘anthropological turn’ in film and visual studies” (2016, 11).

We might then also think about how this turn to the image within this effort of tapping into the sensory relates to a larger issue within contemporary anthropology wherein scholars are attempting to transcend the very politics and inherent coloniality of knowledge production. Take, for instance, how Biehl and Locke (2017) have recently called for an “equality of intelligences” (80) between academics and their subjects of study through renewed engagement with sensory excesses in different social contexts. The understandable desire to move towards affinitive readings of potentials for living life otherwise unfortunately results in an assumed and set definition of the non-sensory or non-creative as the main epistemic issue. This ultimately elides the more complex textures of how we address the simultaneous affinities and risks of sensory readings as embedded within specific spatiotemporal and political contexts.

These issues ultimately speak to what Elhaik (2016) highlights as the underlying risk of a wholly affinitive reading of the sensory to bridge an artistic-creative mindset with an anthropological one: “it would be simply too risky to reduce the futures of art–anthropology dialogues to acquiescing to the sensorial and the sensuous as the ultimate ‘affinity,’ meeting point, and zone of contact between anthropology and art” (28). While he acknowledges that this turn to the sensory is based on critiquing the primacy of the visual in the history of Western knowledges, Elhaik is simultaneously concerned about overstating how tapping into different sensorial nodes is an essentially non-Western way of experiencing life that the West has lost: it merely returns us to “a stylized engagement with radical alterity and the linguistic
liminality of the figures of the foreigner and the native” (2016, 25). The operative gesture here is that engagement with the larger sensory be placed in critical counterpoint with the visual in a manner that works towards renewed social readings that might still reach the creative potentials sought by sensory anthropologists while also incorporating situated questions of disciplinary power and coloniality.

Eavesdropping is thus the node of social experience towards which this chapter attempts to address complex distributions of sight and sound, building on the arguments from previous chapters to address how we might apply these renewed perspectives on space, subjectivity, and the political within a more critical sensory engagement of the urban social. For my work here, the sensory is thus not a uniquely Egyptian or Cairene potential that those attached to Western theory have failed to tap into but rather an intersecting and contingent force towards how we further address complex questions of publicness and reading the social in the Cairo context. Moreover, my previous readings of images in relation to subjectivity and the political have highlighted how I ultimately aim to build a perspective on the urban social that—as further situated within a city where the polity of publicness is decreasing—might re-approach the visual and the aural to generatively work with the “partial and adjusted insights” of the contemporary urban condition (Amin, 2013, 206). That what is at stake is the inherent partiality of knowledge production means thinking more deeply through the question of how different sensory nodes intersect into the visual, in what context, and to what ultimate effort is this sensory engagement directed otherwise to the question of creative potential.

As Elhaik’s turn away from the culturalist perspective is built around the figure of the “intruder” to mark the particular critical intervention that he performs regarding the long-standing colonialist position of the anthropologist (2016, 26), I wonder what “eavesdropping” as a complex and uneven sensory form of gathering knowledge performs for this thesis’ grounding in urban theory. This allows for a different approach than Elhaik’s, whose work is
grounded in the context of contemporary Mexico City art curation, while still remaining discerning around the constraints of sensory engagement in current anthropological discourse. By placing our co-existent visual and aural—as well as creative and critical—attentions more formally into spatiotemporal contexts of urbanity, we can complicate the question of how, by whom, and to what extent knowledge is produced on Cairo given its changing conceptions of publicness.

I begin by introducing the critical contributions of how the aural intersects into the visual in *Al-shuhub*, which I especially read through anthropologist Ghassan Hage’s (2013) work on eavesdropping as allowing us to understand existence otherwise to “states of purposefulness” (90). In bringing this into conversation with urban theory, I note the relevance of this framing in responding to this contemporary Cairo context which has extended from before the “post-revolutionary” period into the difficult political horizon facing the city today. I then think about how this critical turn to the urban through and with the images of *Al-shuhub* allows us to further situate how anthropologists are currently framing the creative potentials of sensory engagement, which I especially pull out by using Nassar’s (2013) contributions on contesting notions of publicness in her ethnographic work on Al-Azhar park. Lastly, I reflect on the larger intervention of this thesis project as providing a renewed framing for how we use sensory engagement with the image to balance creative and critical modalities in working with the particular contributions and challenges posed by the contemporary Cairo context.

**I – Intersections of the aural and visual**

We see an image of what appears to be rye or barley, with one long stalk taking the focus of the camera as the various plants and greens behind it, as well as a young boy just
walking out of the top of the frame, are shot out of focus. Sounds of various voices, multiple
different conversations occurring and names being called out, play over the image. The stalk
curls forward and vibrates lightly in the wind as the voice of a young man emerges in the
middle of the different conversations playing over the image.

“Ok, well what if I like to eavesdrop?” “ṭab ifriḍī anā biḥabb atṣanat”.

The shot changes as this young man pauses, the surrounding voices coming in more distinctly
again. The trunks of three large trees make up the foreground of the image as a young man
and woman sit on a grassy knoll in the shadow of one of the trees. They are sitting in the
distance, turned away from the camera, and behind them are more bushes, trees, and the
slight figure of surrounding city buildings coming through in the blaze of the sun.

“The truth is if I really think about it, I would prefer to eavesdrop on you over listening to
you beside me” “ḥiya al-ḥiqiqah law fakart fī al-mawḍū’a hafḍal atṣanat ‘alaykī min inī
asma’ik wa-intī qā’ idah ganbī”.

His speech is difficult to discern within the surrounding noise of the different conversations
taking place. The young woman and man seen in the frame speak and gesture to one another
in a way that does not line up with the whispered conversation that we are tracking. Behind
the couple in the image, the bushes and greenery continue to shake lightly in the wind
(Maamoun, 2013).

The different layers of viewing Al-shuhub unravel more clearly here, wherein we
begin to realize that the young couple who are having this conversation about eavesdropping
are not meant to be seen in the images on screen. Instead, the film asks us to concentrate our
aural attentions and discern their words among the abundances of voices and sounds in which
the film is immersed—while nevertheless engaging our visual sensibilities in alternative
ways. As we listen in on their back-and-forth—the young woman finds eavesdropping an
invasive act, whereas the young man believes it generates something more truthful—we
continue to look at voyeuristic images of different couples engaged in conversations we can never claim to have heard. There is no subject in these images whom we both see and hear, despite our being presented with an excess of people to look at and voices to listen to beyond the young couple whose conversation we track throughout the film. The partiality of this viewing experience allows us to think more deeply about the underlying tensions of reading the social that emerge through acts of eavesdropping, wherein one must necessarily negotiate excesses of sensorial engagement within their situated social contexts.

In his autoethnographic work on eavesdropping in relation to his own partial deafness and subsequent cochlear implant, anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2013) argues:

just as it is clear that eavesdropping involves a different way of deploying oneself (one’s hearing) in the world, it also involves a different way in which the world makes itself present to us. Generally speaking, for example, there is a positive correlation between the intensity with which one hears a sound and the shortness of the distance between the listener and the source emitting the sound….For an eavesdropper this order of things is reversed: one occupies a world in which the sounds closest to us are experienced as faint while those further away are sharper. (85)

We can already sense such reversals in the viewing experience of Al-shuhub, where our focus on the main conversation occurring across the film sharpens despite the relatively louder fragments of speech that burst in and out. Moreover, the spatial concerns of who or what is closest are upended in different ways: the distance of the camera to its subjects, the couples who sit close to one another yet far away from all others, and the young man’s spoken preference to eavesdrop on his interlocutor from afar rather than listen to her when she is sitting beside him. These dynamics seep into our viewing experience of the film and simultaneously trouble and enrich how we might respond to the images before us.

For Hage’s work, he is interested in such rearrangements of sensory engagement as embedded within the act of eavesdropping because they allow him to think social existence otherwise to modernist perspectives that fail to see beyond “states of purposefulness” (90).
This resonates strongly with the critical urban framework in which this thesis project has been operating, wherein much of the discourse around the urban relates to teleological readings of space in relation to development, centralization, and reform (see the critique of Malaquais, 2011, 8). This is of course the perspective that Lefebvre’s early work sought to contest, and which has led to the complex readings of urban spaces as produced otherwise to such processes in the diverse work of Massey, Amin, Simone, Pieterse, and Abourahme. My work around the image has especially aimed to build affinities with such complicated readings of urban spaces by providing more interactive forms of thinking through and with the image.

My overall work in this thesis thus relates to what Malaquais’ (2011) calls an anti-teleology, which she especially reads through an “art of seeing from multiple perspectives” (10). In pointing our attentions to underlying tensions of how we might differently see the everyday-lived, thereby highlighting what has been previously left out or understudied within the Cairo context, both the image and the subjects, objects, and spaces embedded within them can begin to be thought otherwise to previous framings around the “post-revolutionary” context. What my conversation on “quiet” registers of the image has begun, however—and which I wish to continue in relation to eavesdropping—is that the questions of sight and visibility which undergirded the interventions in previous chapters might be further enriched and challenged by thinking through how we “listen” to as well as look at images (Campt, 2017, 11).

In terms of my turn to eavesdropping, Hage’s work shows how this attention to listening might allow us to think more generatively about our engagement with sensory excess: that one is always deployed towards hearing something or the other within a larger aural landscape, and that this might not always have to occur with the set purpose of understanding all of this sensory excess. As Simone (2016) reminds us in regards to the
undeniable excesses of sensory experiences in the urban, “too often contemporary urban studies mobilize a range of theoretical manoeuvres simply to make the case that cities and urban regions are ineluctably complex, multidimensional, differentiated, unique, unpredictable, emergent and relationally dense” (6). This is a tension that the previous chapters have attempted to address—whether in contextualizing how space intersects into our readings of subjectivity in the image or how the leakage between the material and the discursive emerges in violent contexts of gendered urban experience—but which we might now more critically confront in the context of eavesdropping. If Simone responds to such issues by asking “how might we think more specifically about how to act in domains where such complexity is both a resource for the imagination and an impediment to action” (2016, 6), this chapter addresses such co-existences in thinking through and with images of eavesdropping as producing generative disruptions into wholly affinitive readings of sensory anthropological engagement.

I offer this as one potential way to reframe our approach to reading the simultaneous potentials and violences undergirding the urban today (Simone, 2016; Abaza, 2016), a problematic which we might be able to respond to differently when discerningly expanding our sensory engagement. We see this quite clearly in Abourahme’s turn to sound in the documentary *Future suspended*: “Invisible, it reworks the surfaces nonetheless, rendering the city somehow ‘otherwise’. We see with and through the sound. An aural landscape not so much superimposed on the visual one, but acting as its medium of experience” (2014, 577). This directly relates to the spatiotemporal dynamics he uncovers around *ruin* in the urban—that the political potentials of futuremaking are becoming increasingly constrained, and thus we might alter our sensory engagement with the present, everyday conditions of violent urban contexts to rethink the otherwise.
To begin contextualizing this turn to complex distributions of sight and sound in contemporary Cairo, which is a relatively understudied form of sensory engagement in this context, I pull from a recent thesis by Noor Salama (2018) that offers a sensory ethnography of the conception of *dawsha* (loosely translated as noise, but especially loud, disruptive noise) in relation to questions of throwntogetherness in urban theory. She argues that *dawsha* has a long-standing connotation of capturing bodies and spaces in Cairo in a manner that reifies statist agendas anddisciplinary structures, which complicates the imaginary of the city I have discussed in Chapter II based mainly on the ways in which we see and visualize the city. Her sensory ethnography then operates in an otherwise manner, unravelling the fluidities of the city that are enacted through *dawsha* and which point to different modalities of living in different everyday-lived spaces across Cairo (Salama, 2018, 116-7).

Recent events, though, have only increased and made more complicated the violence of what it means to produce politically disruptive noise in Cairo today. For example, the sudden burst of video images that emerged on social media during the September 2019 protests spread a volume of political dissent across and beyond the city that had not been heard in such a manner since 2015. In Cairo—as one of the many spaces in Egypt where people took to the streets—the sound of the protests extended from the noise of football fans who exited the Zamalek club and made their way across the Qasr Al Nile bridge and into Tahrir square. The resulting period after the protests was then, from the state perspective, built around quieting this noise through extra policing around the spatial order of Tahrir and downtown but also widespread arrests that reached many different areas of the city. On social media, further calls were made to take to the streets the following Friday, which were met with “silence” in terms of that particular sense of making oneself seen and heard in the form of political protest.
However, that Cairo is a city where dawsha is always present and embedded within the everyday machinations of the city points us once again to how we might differently listen to the various sounds of the city in a context wherein such visibly public forms of making noise are becoming increasingly less safe of an option. Equally important to how we address such questions are then also the “quiet” registers of the political in Cairo that I have spoken of in relation to the images of Al-khurūg, wherein we might ultimately bring together these different perspectives to more complexly address ever changing and uneven distributions of seeing and hearing, and of being seen and heard, that continue to shift what exactly publicness constitutes in different urban contexts. These are the intersecting dynamics, then, that allow us to think more deeply through the social and sensory experience of eavesdropping that is presented in Al-shuhub.

In particular, I want to use my turn to Al-shuhub as an opportunity to return to a question posed by Abaza (2014) in her examination of the transformations to public space that occurred in the aftermath of the 2011 revolts. In arguing how this period created an excess of social information that challenged the role of experts and academics, Abaza calls on us to more deeply consider “the impact of the decentring of knowledge and power…. the decomposing of traditional forms of authority that go hand in hand with the excess of information. The question is then how to read the city under these novel constellations” (2014, 167). I would like to continue to pursue this question in especially noting the challenges to notions of publicness that are occurring in the city today, and which my re-examination of contemporary Cairo film has highlighted as being an underdiscussed element of the “post-revolutionary” context.

Abaza (2018) herself acknowledges that this question has become increasingly more difficult to respond to in her simultaneously critical and sympathetic take on the nostalgia experienced in the aftermath of the revolts, and which she also connects to a larger historical
context of Egyptian political nostalgia. As Abaza presents images of the 2011-2013 period to either “suggest alternative types of political action” or “assist in appeasing the bitterness of the present” (2018, 192), how might we think through our sensory engagement to alternatively “read the city” in a manner that responds to her original question regarding the production of knowledges? To answer this in the framework of this thesis, and the contributions of Al-shuhub, means to both expand the underlying potential that we can read into images of the everyday-lived while at the same time embedding them within the particular social and political contexts to which we wish to respond. As such, we might then be able to best respond to the arguments around the political potential of the present as presented by critical urban theory. I turn to such issues in the following section by addressing how my reading of Al-shuhub does not merely provide generative sensory readings of the situated experience the film imagines but simultaneously asks us to critically situate these creative potentials through its everyday-lived spatial context.

Section II – Situating our “open ears”

The frame is filled with greenery: the branches of various trees hang together on the left side of the screen while a short row of bushes cut across the center of the screen, sitting on the grassy knoll that takes up the bottom portion of the image. Above the bushes stands the back of a small bench where a man and a woman are sitting, facing opposite the camera, in the shadow of a much taller bush that juts out above the back of the bench. The young woman from the conversation we are tracking speaks: “Don’t you think that with your ears that close, things will get a bit blown out of proportion?” [“miasmā tīqarrab widnak kidah al-ḥāgāt bitākhud ḫugm akbar min ḫagmhā?”].

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The shot cuts to an image of what appears to be the top of a hill where another young couple are sitting, again facing away from the camera. In this space, the trees and greenery are sparser, opening to the large faces of apartment buildings from the city outside. The young man responds:

So it’s about how I hear, not what you say?” [“ya’nī al-mawdü’a dilwaqtī hayyibqā anā basma’ izāy, mish intī bitqūlī īh?”].

It feels as though sounds from the street outside—car engines and beeping, the faint sound of music being played—have taken a more prominent place within the aural landscape.

“Yes, how you hear and why…and of course there will be things you hear, and things you’ll miss, and things you will imagine in your head” [“aywah, intā bitisma’ izāy wa-līh…wa-ṭab’an hayyibqā fīh ḥāgāt hatisma’hā wa-ḥāgāt hatuqa’ minak, wa-ḥāgāt hatimlāhā min dimāghak”].

The couple in the image inch their faces closer to one another as they continue their own conversation.

“Ok, maybe that’s what’s important in the end, what I hear, even if I heard wrong, and maybe what you say when I’m not around…” [“ṭab yimkin dah huwwa al mohim fī al-akhir, ʾilī anā basma’uh wa-bas, ḥattā law sāma’ ḡalāṭ, wa-yimkin ʾilī intī bitqūlī wa-anā mish mawgūd…”].

The shot cuts to an image of a tree as the camera looks up at it, the orange-tinged blue of the sky peeking through the branches and leaves.

“…is more truthful” [“…aṣddaq”] (Maamoun, 2013).

We might, of course, already see in the back-and-forth between this young couple a kind of balancing of the generativities provided by eavesdropping with the potential violences and invasions that the same act can perform: whether to hesitate over the possibility of misinterpretation or whether to stay steadfast in what one can interpret from the excesses of
information available. This dynamic is further complicated by the intersecting sounds and visuals on screen—from the natural landscape of the park to the creeping presence of the city outside. There is a sense here both that this public space of the park offers a potential respite from the larger urban environment while at the same time qualifying how we might make that sort of separation. How, then, might this provide a renewed standpoint from which to respond to a deeply situated question of knowledge production such as Abaza’s?

In ruminating on his creative approach to anthropological explorations of Tamil film productions, Anand Pandian (2015) notes that “the vulnerability of an open ear to suggestion and deception has long been conceived in Western thought as a problem for knowledge—the ear, as Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler wrote, ‘is fundamentally a passive organ.’” He instead promotes the generativities of the open ear, arguing that “what is at stake here, ultimately, is the possibility of trusting in the creative potential of worldly circumstance, what Gilles Deleuze called ‘belief in the world’” (Pandian, 2015). In, however, ultimately pinning these two perspectives against one another—one which emphasizes the danger of misinterpretation and the other which argues that the pursuit of creative possibilities merit taking that risk—he closes off a conception of the creative that might differently balance the co-existences of these two perspectives. In further contextualizing the images of Al-shuhub within the urban global south perspective that has guided this thesis, I offer additional considerations to incorporate into the creative sensory approaches of scholars such as Pandian and his colleague McLean, who are both currently at the forefront of anthropological discourse on this matter.

Given, of course, the way in which particular urban spaces have guided my readings of images throughout this thesis project—whether the busy streets of downtown Cairo in Cairography or the claustrophobia of a late night microbus in Al-khurūg—I enter this conversation through the constitutive role played by Al-Azhar park in how we think through
and with the images in *Al-shuhub*. For Mntambo (2017), for instance, the park is actually a quite generative space to think through questions of excess in the urban: he notes in his reading of the film *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* that “if the city is a place of housing and work, crossed by instrumentalizing and disciplinary functions, then the park enables a kind of excess, a kind of writing, self-dramatization, and contact that has nothing to do with survival” (223). In other words, there is an openness here to experiences otherwise to the commonly tracked movements and circulations of urban infrastructure, development, and capital that for Mntambo seems to go beyond even my turns to a further contextualized reading of the “street” in Chapter II as well as the “quiet” registers of the political in Chapter III.

We might also think this park in the context of Ingold’s (1997) dwelling perspective, wherein the material space in many ways facilitates the conversation that is occurring in the film, as well as the meeting of the couples who we see in the images above. As *Al-shuhub* continues to frame different couples in individual frames wherein they are surrounded by greenery, we see how the natural landscape of parks, with their relative distance from the city buildings in the background of each frame, offers something like what urban anthropologist Rotenberg (2014) refers to as the “material agency of nature in the city” (391). Here these natural elements are posed as facilitating different forms of actions from urban residents that would not be possible in the more commonly imagined industrial landscape of the city.

As the turn from one image to another in *Al-shuhub* shows, however, both the noise and visual presence of the city outside nevertheless make their way into this space, complicating how we might use its natural imagery to fully open to potentials for reading the otherwise. We see the latter tendencies with McLean (2009), for instance, who wants to use the creative potential of the image and its larger sensory engagement to claim:
Rather, both nature and culture can be seen as products of an open-ended movement of becoming and self-differentiation engendering and traversing diverse terrains, agents, and entities. It is this process itself that I wish to identify as a primary locus of creativity, a creativity prior to the differentiation of culture and nature, subject and object, reality and representation. (233)

To argue for a prior sense of such differentiations that we must tap into is to regret to engage with the long history of coloniality and disciplinary power which underlies any attempt to return to the generativities of nature as untouched by mankind. McLean even notes that his form of anthropological creativity cannot be “adequately understood in an appeal to culture, history, or social context” (2009, 233), opting instead for an open field of difference and sensorial excess that he claims supersedes the need for epistemic inquiries. As Elhaik’s (2016) work has highlighted, however, such perspectives might in fact reify the cultural relativisms and attachments to exotic forms of otherness that McLean is supposedly attempting to transcend.

How, instead, might we contest this reading through situating a space marked by otherwise potentialities in the very historical and social context that McLean sees as potentially inhibiting the creative processes of anthropology? Rather than return, however, to the questions of agency and action in Robertson’s more generalized framing of urban parks, I use Nassar’s (2013) recent study of Al-Azhar park to contextualize how its spatialities are co-constitutively produced with these different couples, including the one that we hear but never see, in a manner that critically troubles the divisions between public and private space, and which we as viewers especially experience at the critical intersections of the visual and aural outlined in the previous section.

In her ethnographic exploration of Al-Azhar park, Nassar takes to task the very open and inclusionary discourse built around Al-Azhar as a public space by highlighting the exclusions and underlying political contexts that intersect into this definition of publicness. She grounds her examination of the material layout and everyday encounters both in and
adjacent to Al-Azhar park within a larger history of how such spaces have contributed to defining publicness: in so doing, this “helps us better understand a historical practice and experience of ‘being’ in parks as a form of being in public space that is nevertheless tamed, recreational, picturesque, and exclusionary. This stands in opposition to a free space of encountering difference” (2013, 69). Similar to my turn to the home space in Al-khurūg, how the private is necessarily navigated in the everyday lives of different urban residents fundamentally alters our abilities to read the social in an open field of publicness—which is exactly what is insinuated in McLean’s turn to “a spontaneous generation of differences” (2009, 232). Nassar raises these same questions, then, in noting that the range of mundane encounters and contestations that occur in this space “infiltrates the political discursive public sphere in Egypt” (2013, 73). She particularly emphasizes questions of class and the multiplicity of diverging political perspectives that resonate with my previous reading of Karim. Thus any creative attempt to think the park in terms of its otherwise possibilities must at the same time confront the particular ways in which underlying political contexts are produced in and by this space.

Within the images of Al-shuhub, the spread of greenery across the expansive Al-Azhar park certainly allows for a different distribution of people: each couple sits within their own frame, rarely surrounded by others and instead by various trees, bushes, and shrubbery. When placed in counterpoint with the different sounds that we hear as we view the film, however, this register of privacy that we seem to see through the distance of physical space is at the same time troubled by the way in which people’s voices travel through the open air. Moreover, it is the very dynamics of what can or cannot be known and definitively spoken of in this layered context of eavesdropping that take the sensory readings which McLean speaks of on an all-encompassing, relatively abstract level to the most intimate of social and political contexts.
What these images ultimately perform for us is a renewed way to read the co-existences of a creative and relatively open sensory approach with a critical, deliberately situated one. The sensory experiences produced among the images both point to the creative potential of eavesdropping as explained by Hage (2013) while at the same time qualifying how we might differently filter such generativities through the complex ways in which sight and sound are also managed or denied in the images. This speaks to how we might continue to complicate even our very conceptions of leisurely and recreational public spaces to think more fundamentally through the manner in which everyday contestations to and re-appropriations of publicness are navigated in a city where this is always a politicized matter.

By following the sensory engagement that *Al-shuhub* simultaneously closes and opens through eavesdropping, we are able to develop a generative sensory reading that nevertheless acknowledges the “shifting” epistemological ground” (Simone and Pieterse, 2018, 15) of urban global south contexts that is instrumental to how we think through underlying layers of the political. In continuing this work, eavesdropping opens up as a specific, context-dependent node of reading the social at the level of the everyday-lived through which we might more strongly highlight how “things work out through an intensely politicized intermixing of different forces, capabilities, inclinations, styles, and opportunities that stretch and constrain what it is possible for residents of any given background or status to do” (Simone, 2010, 44). This allows us to more deeply embed our questions regarding sensory engagement and knowledge production within the dynamic intersections of the everyday-lived urban, both recognizing the fluidities of the social and critically framing how we might nevertheless respond to contestations which emerge from various embedded contexts.
Towards the center of the frame, two tree trunks stand pressed next to one another on a grassy knoll. On one side of them, we see the hint of a young woman’s hijab and shirt. On the other side, we see the back of a young man’s head and torso as he sits with his leg spread out on the grass. About two feet up, the tree trunks diverge—curving out and then slightly back in towards the top of the frame—leaving negative space where the grey sky peeks through.

The shot changes as we return to an image much like the one with which Al-shuhub begins: a close-up of tree branches blowing in the wind, with sunlight coming through the empty spaces in between. The young woman speaks:

“Maybe you’re just trying to romanticize intrusion into people’s business” [“mā yimkin intā bas ilī bitḥāwal tikhalī al-tadakhkhil fī khusūṣiyāt al-nās ḥāgah rūmānsiyah”]. Her voice is even fainter than usual this time as the rumble of other conversations continues to come through.

“Or maybe you just don’t like my ears” [“walā yimkin intī bas ilī mabithabbīsh widānī”].

“No, I love your ears” [“lā, anā bamūt fī widānak”].

The shot holds on the image of the tree as we now listen to the mix of other conversations (Maamoun, 2013).

In the final rebuttal of the young woman who has spent most of this conversation seeming to argue against the “open ear” in the sense that Pandian (2015) has evoked it, we see that its ultimate turn to playfulness results in greater affinities rather than oppositions. I think this is an apt way for me to also frame the way in which my work with urban theory and critical scholars of visual culture has not been to undermine the creative ambitions of sensory anthropology in relation to the image—as my work in the prologue has shown, it was only in
wanting to further delve into the complexities of such a framing that I have produced the criticisms that most befit the Cairo context in which my work is situated. There has always been a passion for this type of sensory engagement within this work no matter how we might pivot from one framework to the other.

It is, after all, also this same spirit of creative pursuit that underlies Abourahme (2014) and Garcia’s (2017) work on film in the context of current conversations in urban theory, which then inspired my initial turn to this field in the context of thinking through and with the image. As Garcia uses the film *Post Tenebras Lux* to challenge her own ethnographic perspective on a situated social space, the *anexo* (informal centers for drug rehabilitation), she ultimately argues:

> In this way, the anexo is more than a consequence of wider social forces, or a mere illustration of a difficult reality. It is a force and a reality itself, and it makes its audience (in this case, the ethnographer) apprehend its potential through the difficulty of its own sensory compositions. (2017, 118)

The co-existence of potentiality with a necessarily difficult sensory engagement is thus perhaps the best encapsulation of what I think eavesdropping does in the images of *Al-shuhub*, as well as what the larger undertaking of this thesis project has attempted to address: that despite the seeming constraints that seem to be built up by the frameworks I have introduced, there are expansive ways to work within—rather than needing to fully expand beyond—these constraining elements. This is something that I have addressed quite early on in the context of 2026’s turn to the abandoned present-everyday, which demands the renewed readings of space as provided by Massey and subsequent urban scholars. This thesis has only continued to expand on what that initial statement regarding constraints means by showing how the deep theoretical challenges and complex readings of the social emerge from the relatively mundane conceit of maintaining an attachment to everyday-lived spaces of Cairo. This has been the most generative way, however, to connect what might have been seen as
scattered readings of film in this urban theoretical context and think through a specific methodology that ideally fits this type of inquiry.

My ultimate, though nevertheless still hesitant, turn to the affinitive and creative is where perhaps even some have found issues with Tarek Elhaik’s disruptive conception of the “intruder” (2016, 25-6). Here we are met with a strong opposition to what the young woman in the above scene of Al-shuhub calls “romanticizing intrusion” (Maamoun, 2013)—which is what characterizes contemporary interest in sensory engagement for Elhaik. While he does productively ground this idea of the anthropologist as a historically violent intruder, which continues to be felt within the particular tensions of contemporary art curation that characterize his fieldwork, the issue with this framework is that it might leave us with little understanding of how to even allow for workable considerations of the otherwise. As Rees (2016) notes, the difficulty regarding how to move beyond the negative in this work seems to have even been addressed by Elhaik in the more affinitive creative inquiries of his subsequent works.

This is why I find eavesdropping to be such a generative marriage of intrusion with affinity—it is a difficult balance to navigate, but a necessary one for the types of inquiries that bridge realms of artistic and social theoretical thought. Moreover, what has emerged from such conversations is that these forms of thought may not have to be divergently characterized by either the critical or the creative so much as they help us perform productive convergences of the two in their multiple ways of coming together.

In terms of how this helps us frame the overall intervention provided by this thesis project, eavesdropping calls for us to pull our sensory attentions to the spaces where we might not immediately think to look or listen—whether the more complex and longstanding relationship to the “street” for the young boy in Karim, the disruptive “screens” put up across
downtown Cairo by the performers of *Cairography*, the “quiet” registers of the political in Souad’s home in *Al-khurūg*, or the tensions of publicness that undergird our sensory reading of the grassy knolls in Al-Azhar park for this final analysis. These were difficult images to think through and with in terms of showing the theoretical and political challenges that undergird them, but it was in being able to interact with and contextualize these images in renewed ways that I have created the intervention that I think is needed given current directions in anthropological discourse.

Moreover, the ethics that drive this project have demanded that I continually return to how we think about this larger paradigm within the embedded contexts of contemporary Cairo that emerge across these films. Not only do we need to move critical conversations towards understudied contexts, but we must engage with how the specific spatiotemporal and material-discursive conditions of these contexts are exactly what provide the fodder for questioning the larger theoretical frameworks that guide academic discourse. Once again, at a time when the hope for political revolution as it has been imagined since the build-up to 2011 has been wavering, we are only left with “partial and adjusted insights” (Amin, 2013, 206) regarding how different ways of thinking the political otherwise to revolution might emerge. What is performed by calling on the pre- and post-revolutionary nexus in a renewed light—perspectives which only become more relevant given current events—is a continuum of everyday experiences that have been and will always remain important nodes through which to address the difficult and complex political horizon of attempting to live life otherwise to disciplinary power in Cairo. If the violence currently being committed to public forms of polity in Cairo is perhaps being experienced in more extreme forms than in other urban global south contexts, how can this turn to what undergirds the very spatial conceptions of the political help pave the way for responding to changing notions of publicness across these different cities?
While this thesis project has not necessarily attempted to define a larger model for conceiving a collective sense of the otherwise, this is because it rather acknowledges that one of the most important steps is re-shaping the very ways of imagining and strategically reading the social to generate renewed frameworks: the operative gesture is not to replace other perspectives so much as highlight the partiality of never fully “knowing” Cairo, which does not have to negate our ability to critically approach how to look and listen to the city for what might have been missed out on before. As 2026 first demonstrated—and as urban theorists such as Abourahme, Simone, and Pieterse continue to argue—any attempt to create a different future must first confront the different presents that have always been there but have not always seemed to be immediately legible within our constantly growing capabilities to see, listen to, and think the social.
Concluding thoughts

In this project, I have aimed to highlight and provide renewed ways to think about Cairo as an everyday-lived space that have not fully been addressed in contemporary social theory. In tracking the particular developments of theoretical conversations around the everyday-lived urban, I highlight how this is an exciting interdisciplinary modality for rethinking critical questions regarding the political as well as how the image might be recast as a simultaneously critical and creative modality of academic inquiry. In the ways in which I have written about images and the attendant academic conversations that I apply to them, I have provided my own embodied form of response to the question of anthropological sensory engagement.

Having worked with a small selection of films throughout this thesis project, my intention has been to spend significant time ruminating on the renewed impact that thinking through and with their images might bring when slowing the pace at which we set our analyses and expanding the imagistic and theoretical work that can be brought into these conversations. This was not in any way an attempt to definitively state how each of these films should be read, and in fact the very way in which I have attempted to write about images through deep descriptions with excesses of sensory information may have opened alternate pathways that the reader may consider but which were not followed in my own inquiries. This project, as a critical academic effort, has been instead built around developing the particular pathways that I follow in the previous chapters through robust theoretical engagement—that I work with images and provide attendant readings of them which best allow me to engage and challenge current conversations within social theory and remain situated within the relevant social contexts of contemporary Cairo.
Having now highlighted the critical contributions that my look at urban space and the everyday-lived provides in intervening into the “sensorial turn” in anthropology, I would like to spend a little more time ruminating on the significance of bridging the anthropological and the imagistic in terms of the benefits that this can bring both to the field and within the classrooms from which our academic projects grow. In particular, my decision to look back at images of the contemporary Cairo context that often remain in archives and cultural centers where they do not always cross over into academia highlights how they are a key resource through which we might be able to complicate and expand the social theoretical and especially ethnographic work that is being conducted in a particular context. That most of the films in this thesis project have not even been discussed within the larger realm of published academia speaks to the additional dynamic conversations that could be brought forth by taking more seriously the contributions of such works and situating them within renewed frameworks and methodologies. These and many other films deserve further exploration as to how they have long been able to contribute to how we think about complex social contexts alternatively to academic lenses.

I thus would not have been able to provide the critical contributions to anthropological discourse that I offer in this thesis were it not for the privileged opportunity that I had to access the materials at Arsenal Archive in Berlin thanks to funding support from The American University in Cairo. In that respect, I would also like to recognize that my work on these seven contemporary Cairo films has not emerged in isolation, and in fact this thesis only came about through a long process of thinking through and with images from a variety of around thirty other films that ultimately could not be properly incorporated into the specific arguments that I outline, especially given the particular time period in which I have been working. To go back to the years 2010-2013 has provided the most fertile ground on which to challenge the “pre-” and “post-” revolutionary nexus that has tended to defined
contemporary studies of Cairo, but as this challenge itself ultimately points us to, this means that there of course exists a larger continuum of filmic images to think through and with beyond this specific period of time.

Moreover, I note how my work has been built around the idea of how I might place these works in conversation with largely anthropological coursework within the gender and women’s studies and anthropology programs. In finding the encouragement to expand conceptions of what constitutes anthropological study, I have been able to provide rich responses to some of the most difficult paradigms from the social theoretical trends that we had been following. This was particularly aided by the encouragement to engage more fundamentally with the creative potentials of anthropology in an anthropoetry course taught by Dr. Munira Khayyat.

One of the most enriching experiences that came out of many of the courses that I took throughout this Master’s program was the way in which the majority of students were interested in applying social theoretical work from across different global south contexts to the Cairo context in which most of our research was immersed. This itself became a working collaboration of different perspectives on a situated context that expanded upon ideas not always reflected in the academic output on Cairo. In particular, my courses on theorizing the urban and theorizing the state—which I took with my supervisor Dr. Martina Rieker and Dr. Hanan Sabea, respectively—were filled with conversations that challenged these theoretical works in relation to the Cairo context which was most immediately available to all of us, though certainly with differing levels of intimacy for those who have lived here their whole lives. It was this atmosphere that enriched my work as someone who has only been living in Cairo for just under four years and posed so many difficult questions regarding how different images and imaginaries of contemporary Cairo might be re-examined.
I especially feel that many of my Egyptian classmates who were engaged in ethnographic work continually expressed concerns about social theoretical approaches to the political in the contemporary Cairo context. As I have shared in Chapter I, the question of hope and possibilities for widespread political change were often met with scrutiny, and this was only further exacerbated by the events of and aftermath to the September 2019 protests. Such concerns also arose even in relation to critical urban frameworks around the everyday, where there is still significant risk of reifying the same gestures of overstating possibilities through the realm of the mundane. What was so exciting about this thesis project was that I was able to undertake a long-gestating process of unravelling how to respond to such concerns from a perspective—that of film and the image—which was not only diverged from the ethnographic perspectives we were engaging but also promoted intellectual inquiries that exist outside of the academic realm.

What I only wish looking back, and which I aim to do with my academic career moving forward, is to have been able to bring more contributions from the relatively unseen films that I screened into the lively conversations occurring about Cairo and anthropological forms of knowledge production at AUC. This is not only because of my desire to want to share the responses to concerns that may have been left underexamined in our classroom discussions but more so that the interactive ways in which the image can be approached as a social theoretical tool would have resulted in even more critical-creative readings of such material beyond those in this project. I think that the image is a particularly useful classroom tool because it allows for such interesting kinds of interactive engagement among different people who see, listen to, and sense these images differently.

What the image can provide that sometimes is more difficult to enact with written forms of ethnography is a way to not only contest and contextualize what is being said but to actually have the immediate sensory material available for us to call on when conducting our
discussions. This provides an especially generative outlook on how we can create conversation around sensory engagement as an important form of re-thinking the everyday-lived social that could have been particularly generative given the way in which my and many of my colleagues works converged around similar spatiotemporal contexts. This method allows us to bring what might be thought of as “fieldwork sites” into the classroom and expand the sources made available to us to perform anthropology critically as well as creatively. I therefore believe that this thesis speaks to academics who engage diverse conversations within social theory and who might have otherwise been hesitant regarding incorporating these recent kinds of sensory engagement called on in anthropology. My work, in adapting the method of thinking through and with the image, has been an example of how such interdisciplinary efforts can be incorporated within classrooms without losing the critical questions which underlie our inquiries.

I ultimately return with affinitive energies, but on slightly different terms, to Anand Pandian’s claim that “cinema has helped me think, in other words, about anthropology’s stake in the world at hand, and the various means that anthropology has at its disposal to convey this stake and its significance” (Romero et al., 2015). I agree both personally and as an academic in such a statement given the ways in which my interest in film has long guided how I attempt to expand my thinking of the world. This is the same intention that I had as I became further engulfed in the anthropological literature in my program at AUC and found that turning to film was what I felt was the best way in which I as an academic could approach the complex social contexts of contemporary Cairo.

I continue to carry images from the films by Maha Maamoun, Hala Elkoussy, Omar Al Shamy, Kinda Hassan, Dalia Naous, Hala Lotfy, Johanna Domke, and Marouan Omara with me as I walk about Cairo. The manners in which I might refuse certain images of the city pop into my mind several times over thanks to 2026. I think about the streets in
downtown Cairo with extra depth given the spectre of the performances in *Cairography*. The ways in which I react to the material spaces of my own home here have been complicated by the meditative images of *Al-khurūg*. And lastly, that my ability to produce knowledge on the city is itself a form of eavesdropping is the most important creative and critical faculty that I take with me as I continue to think about what it means for me to produce academic work on Cairo today.
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