

Schielke, Samuli. 2012. "Surfaces of longing: Cosmopolitan aspiration and frustration in Egypt." *City and Society* 24, 1: 29-37.

Surfaces of longing.

Cosmopolitan aspiration and frustration in Egypt.

Photo Essay

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Cosmopolitanism has become the keyword of a line of research that focuses on the way people of all social and cultural backgrounds - thus not only the elites of Western nations who have historically been most recognized as cosmopolitan - live and posit themselves in the world in ways that cross borders, involve complex positionalities and experiences, and require a mastery of different registers, languages and forms of interaction (see, e.g., Pollock et al. 2002; Marsden 2007; 2008). Also in regard to Egypt, labour migration, social (im)mobility, and class-specific styles of consumption and sociability have become studied under the theme of the cosmopolitanism in the past decade (see, e.g., Ghannam 2002; Singerman and Amar 2006; de Koning 2009; Elsayed 2010). However, this sense of being versed in the world is often a category of imagination as much as it is a form of experience. It is about aspiring to the world, a sense of there being a wider array of paths, possibilities, styles and aims "out there", about the aspiration to make global modernity one's own without becoming fully connected, included, or homogenised in the sense evoked by globalisation (see Rouch 1958, Larkin 1997; Piot 1999; Behrend 2002, Weiss 2009, Gable 2010).

For young Egyptians living in the provincial, marginal spaces of informal neighbourhoods, villages and small towns (that is, the vast majority of the country's population), that wide world of great possibilities is at once all-present and ever elusive. It is there in the houses built and careers made with migrant money, in youth fashion, in consumer culture, in global politics and in the dreams of a better life that can match the standards of the wider world. Since 2011, it is there in the shape of revolutionary political action that has turned the dreams of better life into immediate political demands, and while doing so also shifted the position of Egypt in the imaginary geography of the world to temporarily occupy the center stage of history.

These references to the world contain a definite cosmopolitan moment of positing oneself as a part of the world, across and beyond national and regional boundaries. But it is a reference to the world that in many instances comes along with a sense of abjection (Ferguson 2007), an experience of distance and exclusion that turns the presence of the world in poor and provincial location into a highly ambivalent experience that is a ground of both growing ambitions and a sense about one's own environment being worthless and hopeless (Graw forthcoming). The social practice of imagination (Appadurai 1996) is an ambiguous one, providing at once for moments of hope and moments of tremendous pressure and disappointment. The question of cosmopolitanism is not about a world without borders, but a world full of borders, inhabited by people who try to overcome them. To study cosmopolitanism as a state of aspiration is therefore to study class, and economic and political inequality (see Elsayed 2010).



Figure 1: *In the village of Nazlat al-Rayyis, a densely populated rural settlement closely connected by ties of work and education to the city of Alexandria (one hour away by bus), young men spend much of their time waiting for something to happen sitting in cafes, barber shops, walking in the alleys and the fields. In a barber shop, men gather to discuss the news of the day, to tell jokes, and to discuss business schemes, work opportunities and plans of migration. Fashionable haircuts and shaves are named after famous actors. One wall is covered by a landscape wallpaper showing a touristic site in the Far East, lush and green and exotic. While waiting, young men smoke cigarettes, drink tea, exchange greetings, and circulate gossip. Photo Samuli Schielke 2007.*

This sense of aspiration is far from ephemeral. It is material, it has shape, surface, and form, or, as Egyptians would put it, a "flavor" (ta'm). It is an immediate sensual presence of images, sounds, materials and movements that refer to the standards and possibilities of a First World in the middle of a material world that is marked by low-quality goods, lack of order, poor finish of surfaces, and filth, contrasted by flashy advertisements and media imageries. The global class difference between the fantastic world of possibilities – be it Europe, America and the Gulf or the upper class milieus in Egypt – and the everyday world of limited means is marked by the difference in the material qualities surfaces, dress, vehicles, media, pavement, fashion brands, sports.

This is something that is often easier to point out than to explain. In this essay, I have chosen for photography as the carrier of the narrative because it, too, is a medium of communication that is inherently linked with surfaces. If language is a more of a way to account for depth – to narrate histories, motivations, consequences – photography's strength lies precisely in the lack of such depth. All about the visible surface of a moment in the past, pointing at something but lacking an explicit code (Barthes 1980) the photographic image is a weak medium when it comes to telling a story, dependent as it is on the existence of a narrative, a memory, a known context. It is a strong medium, however, when it comes to conveying the material and visual quality of things and moments. Because the photograph is restricted to the surface of the visible, it is a privileged medium to study surfaces and their "flavours". (Pinney 2003)

The sensory presence of a wider world characterizes the experience of people in much of the postcolonial world, or 'the Third World' to follow Egyptian political and economic parlance. This world – a First World – may not necessarily be located in the United States, Europe, the Arab Gulf States, or the Far East (although it often of course is). It is equally identified with the lives of wealthy Egyptians who unlike their less fortunate compatriots enjoy the privilege of material comfort, social mobility, and travel. The cosmopolitan aspiration of people in provincial Egypt includes both the global and the national, just as it includes both admiration and anger. If the general mood of these images, mostly taken between 2007 and 2010, is a subdued one of longing and waiting, the spring of 2011 brought up a different quality of being related to the wider world, one marked by a combination of anger and fantastic expectations. This moment marked the opening of a different combination of longings and materialities which I can only hint at in the framework of this essay by pointing out at the necessity of symbolic destruction, notably so of the president's image, as a way to clear space for dreams to come.

The surfaces of longing shown in this essay are not always evidently cosmopolitan. Some of them show rather the opposite: spiritual rather than worldly concerns, vantage points with limited horizons, moments of anger and destruction, and lots of grey-brown cement walls. This is a conscious choice, for it is my conviction that a photo essay that would only show the surfaces and spaces of worldly longing for wider horizons would not do justice to the overall sensibility of which that longing is a part: a social world of limited means, of modest but urgent claims, a social life saturated by religion and the expectation of the afterworld along with sex and fame, a political experience where anger and destruction may be the more constructive path towards a better future.



Figure 2-left: On a wall in central Alexandria, a Photoshop-generated paradise with a suburban villa is sold as a poster for the price of 2 Egyptian pounds (less than 40 US cents) along with posters displaying Qur'anic verses and smiling children. Paradise-like landscapes inscribed with Islamic beliefs about the afterlife, with waterfalls and lush green have long been popular as interior decoration, and this poster develops the genre by combining it with one of the most powerful signs of aspiration: a wealthy villa surrounded by a green lawn as it can be marvelled in global media and as it can only be afforded by the rich who are building new gated cities of villas along the ring road of Cairo and the North Coast on the shores of the Mediterranean (see Kuppinger 2004). Photo Samuli Schielke 2010.



Figure 2-right: *View from the balcony of a two-bedroom apartment that houses a teacher's family with two children in eastern Alexandria. With the extremely high population density in Egypt, the reality of even relatively comfortable housing is much more crowded than in the paradise image of a villa surrounded by a garden and facing the sea. Paying the rent is a monthly struggle. This a characteristic vantage point of a cosmopolitan imagination that is intensely aware of its material limitations. Photo Samuli Schielke 2008.*



Figure 3-left: "Why don't you pray?" asks a sign on a wall in a lower middle class neighborhood in Cairo. The streets, shops, homes, and public transportation of Egypt are covered by signs like this, warning about hell and calling the believers to pray and to repent their sins, women to cover themselves and men to teach their family the tenets of Islam. They constitute a daily presence of the Islamic revival, the worldwide turn to strict scripturalist religion that has transformed Egypt in the past decades. It carries a promise of happiness and good life for every believer, and power and pride for the global community of Muslims. But this presence is not exclusive. It coexists and competes with other compelling promises and pursuits. Photo Samuli Schielke 2008.



Figure 3-right: "Che" is called so because of his admiration for the Cuban revolution. Also for those with less pronounced political views, Che Guevara has become the icon of rebellious youthfulness. "Che" has a dream: to migrate to the United States. Shortly after this picture was taken he got a contract to work in an Arab Gulf state and saw his chance to get out of the "prison" of Egypt as he puts it. After working under extremely bad conditions for two years, he returned to his native village in 2010, just on time to participate in the January 25 Revolution. But only few months later, he was compelled to sign a new work contract, again in one of the Gulf states. Photo Samuli Schielke 2007.



Figure 4-left: *In a society that at other times shows itself as staunchly pious and prudent, contemporary pop music has at the same time developed an explicitly sexual appeal, very much aided by the video clip. While commercial Arab pop maintains a sound that is distinctively different from Western pop music, the aesthetics of wealth, style, and sex appeal it embodies refer to a world of class and fame that is explicitly cosmopolitan in a rather secular way. Photo Samuli Schielke 2008.*



Figure 4-right: Association football enjoys great popularity in Egypt, and while Egypt can boast a successful national team and a number of famous clubs, most men - and many women - also identify with European teams which they often support with great enthusiasm (for example, Tottenham worn by the man in the middle). They have a share in the desire for the fashion and fame of international sports. But their sense of belonging to a world community of fans is troubled by their acute awareness of their provincial position. Theirs are counterfeit Abibas [sic] training suits, international matches watched in the café, and local amateur tournaments. Photo Samuli Schielke 2007.



Figure 5-left: *The private car is the ultimate object of material aspiration in Egypt. Still few can afford one, but the number of those who can is increasing in part also due to attractive installment plans offered by car dealers. To own a car, my Egyptian friends assert, means to have a sense of freedom and privacy in an increasingly crowded and stressful world. This is one of the things Egyptian migrants to Europe and the Gulf are often after: a sense of living in comfort, with an educated wife from a good family, a spacious apartment, a private car, a comfortable life shaped after consumerist ideals of global currency. But the word "love" (notably in English) on the cushion reminds us that the global spread of consumer goods is also accompanied by the rapid spread of romantic love as a modernist model of desire and marriage. Yet while love is extremely present in the media, literature, as well as in the form of such everyday objects, couples who actually wish to marry for love routinely face prohibitively high material demands, and the path to marriage often requires a long (and oftentimes futile) detour of migrant work. Photo Samuli Schielke 2008.*



Figure 5-right: *For those who cannot afford a car, the toktok imported from India has become a popular form of transportation, cheaper than the taxi and more private than the bus. The driver of a toktok in a provincial town has decorated his vehicle with German flags. (Other toktoks of the town carry Spanish, Italian and French flags, as well as the flag of Manchester United, along with religious and romantic phrases.) He wears the jersey of the Dutch football team which he received as a present from a Dutch tourist when he was working in the beach resort of Hurghada. He hopes to marry her and move abroad. While waiting, he works as a driver to make ends meet. The tourist resorts of Egypt are in many ways a world in-between, a site of internal migration and modernity for young Egyptians, a site of authenticity and exotism for tourists – and the site of a variety of romantic and sexual encounters (Jacobs 2010). But the income the tourist resorts generate is very precarious, and workers are often compelled to return anytime. Photo Samuli Schielke 2007.*



Figure 6: This advertisement board displaying the former president Hosni Mubarak in central Alexandria was destroyed by protesters on January 25, 2011 (for a video of the event, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0ZDYuWhJgk>). For a short moment, Egypt stood in the limelight of history, providing inspiration for other parts of the world, temporarily inverting the cosmopolitan distinction between those who can and those who dream. This moment, fantastic and transient yet unforgettable to those who were a part of it, did not change the underlying economical inequalities, but it did mark an angry departure from the subdued mood of the preceding years, a shift to a new configurations of desires, anxieties, materialities, and frustrations, different ways to look out to the world. Photo Samuli Schielke 2011.

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