THE LAST BROADCAST

by PETER SNOWDON

No one is gonna believe what they’re gonna see right now on this channel. It’s just crazy...

—Mohammed Nabbous
(Benghazi, Libya, 19 March 2011)

Transcript excerpt:

—Speaker—
“...on top of us, yeah I know... I know, I heard this.”

“Hello hello? Check check check.”

“Check check check hello?”

“If you can hear me, hello.”

“He is bombing Benghazi, no doubt. I have seen it myself, with my own eyes. Right now I was in an area called Hayat Doular, Doular area. And he has bombed it. He has bombed it, although that area, has no, nothing... not even a camp, nothing.”

(Exhales loudly)

“I can’t talk much, I’m waiting for the battery to charge, and then I’m going to go live with you.”

“I mean, this is just not good any more. He has to be, he has to be stopped. I mean, I I I just... I just don’t know...”

(Sighs)
In Arabic: “...hagibli maya.”

(Leans over)

“Give me some water please.”

(He takes the bottle and drinks. We hear him swallow)

“Okay, I have the video here, I’m preparing everything.”
I'm gonna have to hang up

A man breaks off a conversation to turn towards the camera. As he leans closer, his eyes come into view. Yet these are not eyes in which we might recognize ourselves: they are empty orbits, two rough smudges of blackness. And even when I say a man, some latitude of approximation is implied.

From the very beginning, the surface of the image is recalcitrant to our reading. No sooner does a figure emerge, than the pixels that make it up regroup, block and bleed. The face, that we know should be the centre of our attention, oscillates between expressionism and abstraction. The skin tones stretch into ever more garish shades, while the body underneath recedes into the darkness of its sweater—as if the man who is speaking to us, moved by a paroxysm of patriotism, were trying to merge with the flag that hangs behind him on the wall.1

While his figure seems poised on the verge of some definitive withdrawal, his voice reaches us clearly, not only across distance and time, but also across all the generations of sampling and compression which separate us, wherever and whenever we may be, from him. Not that the sound track is without its own imperfections, of which the most obvious is the near-constant low frequency hum that serves as a sort of drone, musically binding the whole sequence together. And his voice, too, is insistently incarnate. Its silences are not silences, for they are repeatedly interrupted by a body that is panting for breath, sniffing as if to hold back a head cold, calling for water, sighing or swallowing. Here, the oral largely exceeds the vocal. To such an extent that, by the end of the shot, I find myself hearing the machine hum not so much as a mechanical intrusion on some desired transparency, as just another symptom of the too-great proximity of this body.

So then I try to reconstruct what has happened. This man has run in from somewhere. He is obviously still in some kind of shock, both physical and emotional. In a camera (which I do not see) he claims to have some images—both video and still images—which he wants to show me. Everything that unfolds before, and with, his webcam is about wanting to show me those images, about wanting me to see them. And at the end, it is the person who wanted to show them to me, who wanted me to want them, and who has succeeded in transmitting this desire to me, who will definitively frustrate me of its object.

So I am promised images which I am told I will not believe even if I do see them, and which I never get to see. I am promised them by a man who is out of breath, who has no words, and sometimes, for long stretches, no voice even, with which to describe them. I am promised something that cannot be described, that cannot be believed, and that will not, in the end, be made visible. And instead, I am made party for more than five minutes to the long, arduous, complicated, ultimately unsuccessful, and only intermittently intelligible process of trying to extract those images from the camera and put them into the computer.

This video, then, proposes a kind of paradox. If the images are inside the camera—the one that has been brought back from outside—then they must be real. Indeed, we have the testimony of the cameraman to reinforce that of the camera. As he tells us: “He is bombimg Benghazi, no doubt. I have seen it myself, with my own eyes.”

And the camera was, in turn, with him, in order to bear witness to his witnessing.

If the images, on the other hand, were to get into the computer—if the battery could be charged in time, if the camera would last long enough, if they could finally be downloaded—then we could see them. But there would also be the risk that they would not, then, be quite so real, to us. They would lose something of their reality in being made visible. They would be, as we are repeatedly told they are, unbelievable. And the bond of trust between viewer and filer, that everything in this video both assumes and leads towards, would be broken at the very moment it is consummated.

The testimony of the camera, then, its power to vindicate the truth, lies less in the images which it can show us, than in these images that remain enclosed inside it. Just as the conviction that the cameraman’s words carry is reinforced by his inability to find the words for what he has seen. Just as the images he himself has seen with his own eyes remain forever trapped inside him. The force of veridiction that resides in the camera; then, lies less in the images it makes, than in its refusal to share them with us. And the more adamant that refusal is, the greater the truth. So that the ultimate proof that the atrocities which the whole of this video desperately points towards did in fact take place, is that we will never see them. The ultimate proof is that there is no proof that can be shared. Their resistance to representation becomes, for us, the guarantor that these were, in fact, singular events, events in which one or more than one particular lives hung in the balance, in which people died, or risked death, not as images, but as real bodies made of flesh and blood. For the death that can be represented is only a generic death, an idea of mortality, an element in a scenario, and not the absolute and irreversible interruption of the present that will one day really happen, to me, as it will to you.

This video, then, promises us images of devastation, destruction, horror. And instead, all we get to see is a man sitting in a room in front of his laptop, trying to get it to do something for him, and failing. We see him struggle with the physical signs of exhaustion, thirst, confusion, shock, and recalcitrant

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The Last Broadcast of Mohammed Nabbous—The Message from His Widow
LIWPProductions (2011)
technology. We hear his body fighting with lack of breath, with mucus and congestion, and with uncooperative equipment. And we also see his own image struggling, in vain, to cohere in and through the webcam and its associated hard and software.

Of course, as Laura Marks has argued in another context, there is a sense in which the less we can see in these images, the more physical, sensual reality we are inclined to lend them (Marks 2002:1-20). The less they speak to our eyes, and through them to our rational minds that seek to comprehend and control the world, the more they speak directly, viscerally, through their excess of proximity and their flagrant failures of control, to our bodies. Even as our interlocutor denies us the images he cannot describe to us, his own image, and the sounds which orchestrate it, take on an ever greater and more incontrovertible presence, until they come to stand in for those other absent images. Not for the horror that they can never hope to emulate, nor for the transparency and referential clarity which we imagine we are denied, but for their immediate, pre-conceptual givenness, the spectre of whose arbitrary cancellation is the ground of that horror’s possibility.

The result is a kind of visual litotes, in which the more the cameraman insists that we have not yet seen the images he wants to show us, the more we get the feeling that the real horror, the real image that announces both his and our ineluctable mortality, is to be found not among the images that are trapped in his camera, but rather in those that lie there before us, pinned and struggling on our computer screens as we watch him go and come among the lacework of the indifferent pixels, until that final, fatal interruption: “I’m gonna have to hang up…”

**These poor images**

I have to go now. Please keep the channel moving, and keep the videos posting. And just—I will try if I have any news, I’ll try to come and give you the news we have. Even tho’ that Mo—there isn’t much to do... I will try my best going.

—Perditta Nabbous (Benghazi, Libya, 20 March 2011)

On the morning of 21 March 2011, Eastern Standard Time, an anonymous American blogger who goes by the handle LLWProductions uploaded a portmanteau video to her YouTube channel under the title: *Last broadcast from Mohammed Nabbous and Message from his Widow*. The montage is composed of two extended clips, each consisting of a single shot, grabbed from the live stream of Libya Alhrara TV over the previous 48 hours, preceded by a brief verbal explanation of the context, and separated by a second of black and silence.

The first clip is the one I have just described: a broadcast made on the morning of 19 March by Mohammed Nabbous, the sole creator and driving force of this online TV and radio station. In this fragment, he is seeking to provide video evidence that Gaddafi’s armed forces had just broken a ceasefire recently put in place in response to UN Security Council Resolution 1973.

The second clip consists of an awkwardly framed still image of an Arabesque-style living room, against which plays a radio broadcast made by Nabbous’s widow Samra Naas (also known as Perditta) on 20 March, shortly after his death. In the few words she is able to speak through her grief, hemmed in by extended sighs and difficult silences, Perditta announces Mo’s death, recounts his wish to find death as a martyr, and implores viewers to “keep the channel going” by posting videos, and doing whatever else they can to halt the bombing of Benghazi. Her message lasts almost four and a half minutes (only 45 seconds less than Mo’s), and her silences makes up by far the larger part of it, as her insistence on the vital need to sustain and continue Mo’s work is constantly interrupted and undermined by the extremity of her own distress. This clip is extremely difficult to watch in its raw exposure of an unbearable intimacy, and I will not offer any further comment on it here.

On the morning of 20 March, Mohammed Nabbous was shot in the head by a sniper while reporting a firefight between rebels and the Libyan army. He died around 3pm that afternoon in hospital. (The audio report he was making as he was shot was also broadcast, and can still be found on YouTube.)

By reposing these videos, in this specific montage, so rapidly after Nabbous’s death, LLWProductions responds, albeit obliquely, to Perditta’s appeal to “keep posting videos.” And in doing so, she transforms the meaning of the livestream that was broadcast two days before. By reframing it, not as a breaking report on a war raging just off camera, but as a retrospective homage to the journalist who made it, she shifts this video from the register of forensic reporting, to that of funerary memorial. In the place of the evidence of a crime, we are presented with a *memento mori*.

As a result of this reframing, much of what might have seemed in the original livestream accidental or incompetent, failures of manipulation or judgement, or simply noise, is endowed with a greater resonance, and a different meaning. Rather than unrelated elements in a banal catalogue of arbitrary errors, each mishap is recast as a self-reflexive gesture, exhibiting and commenting on the porosity of media activism in particular, and representation in general. Released from the overbearing present of the breaking news agenda, the technical interminnences and disconnections with which the amateur journalist struggled ineffectually are reconfigured as an extended proleptic allegory of the one brutal and definitive interruption that was about to be visited, against his will, upon his own life.
What makes the video of Nabbous’s last broadcast so moving, then, is not so much what it was intended to say—the real struggle to communicate and to bear witness that it embodies—but rather the way that message has been extended and redirected through its afterlife in the YouTube ecosystem, thanks to which it now exists principally as part of a montage made by an anonymous woman blogger from the USA.* It is as if in repurposing this video fragment, LLWProductions had completed an act of interrupted semiosis which Nabbous himself had only been able to begin.

It is therefore entirely apt that this reframing is achieved not simply by montage and by verbal context, but also by the (doubtless unintentional) introduction into this video fragment of another layer of opacity and obscurity. For it seems clear that the degraded quality of the images LLWProductions circulated is not simply a further index of the technical difficulties with which Nabbous was confronted on that fateful day in March 2011. Rather, the truncation and pixelation which contribute so strongly to the video’s emotional effect would appear to be largely, if not entirely, the result of the additional layers of lossy compression introduced when the original was grabbed, mashed up and reuploaded. What moves us so strongly, then, as we watch Nabbous’s face oscillate on the verge of disfiguration, is not something about the images that were broadcast in real time from Benghazi, but rather something about the way in which they have been reflected and refracted back to us from America.

So, for me at least, the meaning of this video as we now have it inseparable from this act of retrospective collaboration between two amateur journalists who never had the chance to meet. In the course of reframing Nabbous’s failed attempt to denounce a crime by the Gaddafi regime as both a homage to his memory, and as her own denunciation of the crime that was his death, LLWProductions accidentally conferred on it an opacity that radically reroutes the questions we might ask of it.

In the place of the document that Nabbous was finally unable to show us, this video now functions as an index linking his mortality to ours, through the mortal body of the video itself. In these poor images, to borrow Hito Steyerl’s phrase, we see an alternative moral economy emerging, a relationship between indigenous revolutionaries and their international audience that goes well beyond the one that Nabbous himself was calling for (Steyerl, 2009). Such a relationship would be grounded not on more information, but on less; not on more certainty, but on more humility. It would demand not the impossible proof of war crimes, that always comes too late, but a direct, physical awareness of our shared vulnerability and mortality. And it would be based on the belief that it is by elaborating our own invisible alliances around that shared awareness, rather than through better compliance with the codes of high-resolution visibility promoted by the military-industrial-entertainment complex, that the protection of the most vulnerable can be most effectively addressed.

These last images of Mohammed Nabbous resemble nothing more than ourselves, if only in our fragility and our imperfection. And it is that fragility and that imperfection which call for the invention of new forms of reciprocity, new modes of grassroots internationalism, new modalities of peer-to-peer protection, beyond and without the current modes of power and government which have so diserved us.

Though we see each other only through a chain of LCDs, and darkly, still let us hope that next time we may see each other before it is too late.

* This writing began life as a paper presented at the International Lisbon Conference on Philosophy and Film in May 2014. I am grateful to Victoria Walden, Pooja Rangan and Laura Waddington for their encouragement and their comments on the initial draft.

ENDNOTES

1. This is the flag of the Kingdom of Libya (1951-69) that was revived by the rebels during the revolution. Perhaps it is not entirely ironic that the framing preserves the red (here, orange) for blood, and the black for the dark days of oppression, while omitting the green of future agricultural prosperity intended by the original designers. For a fuller explanation, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Libya> (accessed on 20 November 2015).


3. For more information on Mohammed Nabbous’ life and work, see Carvin 2015 and the memorial website created at http://www.mohammednabbous.com/.

4. On her main blog, motleynews.net, LLWProductions provides a lot of information about herself, but not her name. See: <http://motleynews.net/about/> (accessed on 20 November 2015).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Peter Snowdon’s film and video work combines documentary process with formal experimentation. His first feature-length film, The Uprising, debuted at the Bhilava International Documentary Film Festival in 2013, where it was awarded with the Opus Bonum prize for best world documentary. He teaches filmmaking at the University of the West of Scotland.

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