البُنى التحتية للسينما
مواقع إنطلاق حميمية

Cinema’s Infrastructures
Interpersonal Points of Departure

NAAS · ناس
شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة
NETWORK OF ARAB ALTERNATIVE SCREENS

عصمت

العدد الخامس من شخصيات
السلسلة الثانية من ملفات ناس
شتاء ٢٠٢٢/ ربيع ٢٠٢٣
البنى التحتية للسينما

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www.naasnetwork.org

عصمت

قائمة نشر «عصمت» (٢٠٢٠) محرر وناشر ومجموعة مطبوعات وشخصيات. نتخصص في النشر الفني وإنتاج الكتب والمطبوعات التي تشتبك مع المجال الفني والإنتاج الثقافي. ننشر ونعمل تحت اسم «عصمت» وهي شخصية قامت بدورها سناء يونس فى فيلم «جنون الشباب» (خليل شوقي، ١٩٧٢)، عصمت هي بوصلتنا ومصدر إلهامنا والقاهرة هي مدينتنا.
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شخصيات

شخصيات نشرة فصلية ورقية (وأحيانا رقمية) تصدرها عصمت في الربيع والشتاء وتفسح من خلالها المجال للمقال النقدي الطويل، مع إعارة اهتمام خاص للمقالات في مجال النقد السينمائي. صدر أول عدد لشخصيات في ربيع ٢٠٢١ وقد صدر في شتاء ٢٠٢٢/ربيع ٢٠٢٣ العدد الخامس بالتعاون مع شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة (ناس) أونلاين على ملفات ناس.

شخصيات
العدد الخامس
شتاء ٢٠٢٢/ ربيع ٢٠٢٣
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ترجمة حسين الحاج

تستكمل هذه المجموعة من المقالات عملية من التفكير الجماعي بدأت في يوليو ٢٠٢٢، وهي تضم أساليب كتابة مختلفة ووقائع مرصودة وآمال معقودة. لقد تطورت البُنى التحتية للسينما عقب ثلاثة سمينارات أقامها برنامج زمالة شبكة "ناس" وقائمة نشر عصمت في العام الماضي.

التحق تسعة زملاء بالبرنامج بعد إطلاق دعوة مفتوحة لكل الباحثين والممارسين في الحقل السينمائي للتفكير في بناء الشبكات وتبادل الأقران والنماذج التنظيمية المجتمعية بوصفها وسائل محتملة للبنى التحتية الناشئة في السينما. في هذه المقالات ننشر تلبية الزملاء التسعة لهذه الدعوة في تخيل بُنى تحتية ناشئة، حيث يمثل كل مقال خطة مشروع بحثي قائم.

يصدر مقال ريمان ساداني عن حواراتها المتواصلة مع مجموعة جامعي شرائط الفيديو VHS وأصحاب قنوات يوتيوب. بناءً على هذه الحوارات تكتب عن مجهودات المؤرشفين الهواة والنقاش حول الفقد وحالة البعثرة التي تميز الأرشيفات العراقية الصوتية المرئية. في سبتمبر العام الماضي، تواصل باسل السبيعي مع صانعة الأفلام المتمرسة هالة العبد الله، وتحدثا حول الحاجة إلى الشاعرية والجماعة والحوار بين الأجيال وعام ٢٠١١ بوصفه لحظة انقطاع في تاريخ الصورة في سوريا. يتحدث السبيعي والعبد الله عن اللحظات التي حُرمت فيها المجموعات من إمكانية التمثيل في الصور عن قصد، ويمثل هذا اهتمامًا أساسيًا في مساهمة إسكندر عبد الله التي تقترح "المشاهدة الكويرية" بوصفها طريقة للتغلب على غياب الصورة وفقدها.

واعتمادًا على الحوار، يحاور أحمد تاج أمين الهلالي، أحد مؤسسي نادي السينما في قوص بقنا، حيث يكشف شغف أمين وجهوده في إيجاد مساحة للسينما في مدينته، وكيفية نجاح نادي السينما في التواجد برغم من نقص الموارد المتاحة، والحيل المطلوبة للعمل داخل مجتمع يشك فيما يمكن للسينما أن تقدمه. تتوافق النقطة الأخيرة مع ما كتبه فرج السليني، الذي جمع ملاحظاته عقب الانتهاء من سلسلة من الحوارات مع العاملين الثقافيين في ليبيا. تكشف ملاحظاته عن الطريقة التي تعمل بها الأجهزة الأمنية على تحجيم النشاط الثقافي والحلول الممكنة لهذه المشكلة.

تظل السينما المستقلة عدسة منتجة من أجل فهم ما تفتقر إليه البنى التحتية الحالية للسينما ولتوثيق الحيل والعمليات الجديدة للعمل في المجال السينمائي. تفحص فالنتينا فيلّاني في مقالها البنى التحتية للتوزيع السينمائي التي تتداول من خلالها الأفلام المصرية المستقلة في الداخل والخارج كي تسأل عن مصير هذا النوع من السينما. وانطلاقًا من روح إيجاد حيل وخطط جديدة، تكتب فرح حلابة في مساهمتها عن محاولتها لتطوير دليل لصناع الأفلام الذين يرغبون في الانضمام إلى الأنتاجات السينمائية المسؤولة أمام الجماعات التي تشكل جزءًا منها وتمثلها.

تستسقي كل مقالة محتواها من تجربة كاتبها المعاشة، كما أنها تكشف عن المساحة التي تشغلها السينما في تلك التجارب من خلال التقريب بين هذه الوقائع ورسم أشكال مختلفة من الحياة المحيطة أو التي يمكن أن تحيط بالسينما، حيث يمكن لهذا الرسم أن يوجه الجهود نحو تنظيم البنى التحتية للسينما القائمة أو إعادة تنظيمها.

تصدر هذه المجموعة من المقالات عن تعاون بين شبكة "ناس" وقائمة نشر عصمت في العدد الخامس من شخصيات، وهي نشرة فيلمية تحررها قائمة نشر عصمت وتصدرها في الربيع والشتاء. يعد هذا العدد الرقمي الأول من شخصيات، كما أنه عددها الأول الذي يصدر بلغتين، وهو سينشر على أجزاء على مدونة "ملفات ناس" خلال الشهور الثلاثة القادمة. يعتبر وجود مدونة مخصصة للبحث عن السينما في العالم العربي فكرة عظيمة وسيحمل بلا شك نتائج مثمرة! أتمنى لهذه المجموعة من المقالات أن تكون ناضجة في أعين القراء والباحثين المتابعين لملفات ناس وذات فائدة لهم.

أود أن أشكر الضيوف الذين انضموا إلى سمينارات برنامج الزمالة. كما أوجه شكري إلى سابين أبي صابر على تنسيق برنامج الزمالة وحسين الحاج على ترجمة المقدمة للعربية وآية إيهاب على تدقيق النصوص العربية، ولا يفوتني أن أشكر في النهاية المصممة سارة حلبي.

نور الصافوري،
المحررة الناشرة لقائمة نشر عصمت.

This collection of essays continues a process of collective thinking that began in July 2022. It is wide ranging in writing styles, the realities addressed, and full of hope. Cinema's Infrastructures developed following a series of three seminars that kicked off the NAAS x Esmat—Publishing List fellowship program last year.

Nine fellows joined the program following an open call that invited cinema practitioners and researchers to think about network-building, peer-to-peer value exchange, and community-oriented organizational models as possible vehicles for an emergent infrastructure for cinema. In this collection we publish the fellows' answers to this call for imagining an emergent infrastructure. Each essay plots an ongoing research project.

Reman Sadani's essay comes out of her ongoing conversations with a group of VHS collectors and YouTube channel hosts. From these conversations she writes about the labor of amateur archivists, and the discourse of loss and the state of ba'thara (dispersal) which characterize the situation of Iraqi audio visual archives. In September of last year Basil Alsubee got in touch with veteran filmmaker Hala Alabdalla. In the published interview they speak about the need for poetics, community, intergenerational dialogue, and 2011 as a moment of rupture in the history of the image in Syria. Alsubee and Alabdalla also speak about moments when groups are intentionally denied the possibility of representation in images. This is a foundational concern in Iskandar Abdalla's contribution to this collection which proposes 'queer viewing' as a method to combat the absence and loss of the image.

Also relying on the interview as a tool, Ahmed Tag interviews Amin Elhelaly, one of the founders of the cine-club in Qoos, Qena. The published interview shows Amin's passion, his efforts to carve out a space for cinema in his hometown, how the cine-club managed to come together despite the meager resources available, and the tactics required to work in a community that is suspicious about what cinema can offer. This last point resonates across to what Faraj Alsileeni writes about. Alsileeni's essay collects his observations following a series of

interviews with cultural workers in Libya. His observations show how on the ground security apparatuses work to limit cultural activities and what might be possible solutions.

Independent cinema remains a productive lens from which to understand what is lacking in the present cinema infrastructure and to register new tactics and processes for work in the field. Valentina Villani examines in her essay the distribution and circulation infrastructure through which independent Egyptian films circulate, both internationally and at home, to ask what the future may look like for this kind of cinema. In the spirit of finding new tactics and strategies, Farah Hallaba also writes in her contribution about her attempt to develop a guide for filmmakers who wish to be part of cinematic productions that are accountable to the communities they are part of and represent.

Each essay taps into its writer's lived experience and shows how cinema is part of it. By putting these realities in proximity, a drawing of the different forms of life that surround, or could surround cinema transpires. This drawing can then guide efforts to reorganize, or organize, the present infrastructure of cinema.

This collection comes out of a collaboration between NAAS and Esmat—Publishing List and is issue#5 of Shakhsyat (Characters), the film zine that Esmat produces and edits in spring and winter. This is the first digital issue of Shakhsyat, as well as the first bilingual issue. It will be released in parts over the coming three months online on Malaffat NAAS. Having a blog dedicated to research on cinema in the Arab world is a great idea that without a doubt will bear wonderful fruits! I hope this collection will age well and be useful to the community of readers and researchers that follow Malaffat NAAS.

I would like to thank the guests who joined the fellowship seminars. Thanks also to Sabine Abi Saber for coordinating the fellowship program, Hussien Elhajj for translating the introduction into Arabic and Aya Ehab for copy editing the Arabic texts. Thank you as well to the designer Sarah Habli.

Nour El Safoury
Editor and Publisher of Esmat—Publishing List

Magnetic Memories: How To Mend That Which Has Been Ruptured?

By Reman Sadani

BAGHDAD 2003 – Filmmaker Abbas Fahdel arrives at the Baghdad Cinema Studios. The rainsacking of government institutions has just taken place. He is accompanied by Sami Qaftan, an established actor in his sixties. They invite us – the viewers – to contemplate the burned state buildings in the surroundings, only to be warned by Sami that the damage on the exterior does not measure up to the damage caused inside.

Still from Homeland: Iraq Year Zero (d. Abbas Fahdel, 2015).

Sami points to the burned down building of the Department of Film and Theatre (DFT) in the distance. He believes it was set on fire because it is operated by the Ministry of Culture. Fire and destruction are not uncommon in the history of the Department of Film and Theatre. In the nineties, Ahmed Fayadh Al Mafraji, a prominent Iraqi cultural historian and the founder of the archive centre in the DFT, allegedly took documents from the cinema archives to his home and destroyed them all.[1]

In 1994, a suicide letter was found among Al Mafraji's belongings requesting that his dead body is left where found. He did not commit suicide, but a few attributed his suicide letter and decision to destruct the paper archive to the dire conditions caused by the trade sanctions which had led Al Mafraji to withdraw from public life and sell his private collection of books. Though it is unclear whether the method of destruction was burning or shredding, all accounts confirm the loss of many documents on cultural production in Iraq that Al Mafraji had gathered over the years.[2]

1 Ala Al Mafraji, 'Mahdi Abbas: on lack of strategies to document the cultural legacy in Iraq' Al Mada Newspaper, 2021. https://almadapaper.net//view.php?cat=237052

2 Ibrahim Khalil Al 'Alaf. 'Ahmed Fayadh Al Mafraji and archiving in Iraq' in Al Hiwar Mutamadin, 2016. https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=531849

Still from Homeland: Iraq Year Zero (d. Abbas Fahdel, 2015).

To understand the sentiment that the Iraqi discourse on archives got stuck in, I want to return to the scene in Abbas Fahdel's documentary Homeland: Iraq Year Zero (2015). As Sami enters the dark Baghdad Cinema Studios, he stumbles upon a hat pierced by a bullet. He smiles and clarifies that "it is not a Coalition Forces' bullet. It's [from] the revolution of 1920 [against the British]." The prop comes from Mohammed Shukri Jamil's film Al Mas'ala Al Kubra (Clash of Loyalties, 1983), in which Sami plays the role of Suliman, an Iraqi patriot who leads the assassination of Colonel Leachman.

Sami walks away with the hat, and guides us into other departments. He undusts a flatbed and turns the levers to revive the worn out machine. He unreels a film, suspecting it to be Ta'er El Shams (The Sun Bird, 1991), a film about an Iraqi pilot's attempt to return home after being captured by Iranian forces during the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988). After inspecting a few film frames, Sami brings the reel close to his chest, repeating 'ma' al asaf' (it's unfortunate).

Still from Homeland: Iraq Year Zero (d. Abbas Fahdel, 2015).

However, the filmmaker is not satisfied. He does not allow us distance and decides to redemonstrate what we had just witnessed, recreating the previous shot once more. Another shot is introduced. The camera shows Sami shaking tangled reels of film as if they were a dead body he wants to bring back to life. He addresses someone off camera asking: "is this Iraqi cinema? Is this where it ends up?" The dramaturgy of this shot captures the 2003 moment.

It expresses a tragedy and a sense of helplessness in the face of what unfolded following the US-led invasion of Iraq. It evokes a familiar poetic image of al wuquf 'ala al atlal (standing at the ruins), which the filmmaker repetitively tries to capture as if he is seized by a perpetual lament. This offers a glimpse into the way in which the Iraqi discourse on archives fixated on a sentiment of loss since 2003, whereby one stands at the ruins with nothing but recollections.

Still from Homeland: Iraq Year Zero (d. Abbas Fahdel, 2015).

A discourse of loss however is insufficient to explain the ongoing failings of Iraqi public institutions to devise a strategy for archiving audiovisual material and offering the public access to them. While some of the audiovisual archives were completely damaged in 2003, others were removed from public institutions during lootings or self-initiated rescue operations. According to Ali Al-Shalah, member of the Board of Trustees of the Iraqi Media Network, looters targeted the archives of the State Radio and Television building, the Department of Cinema and Theatre, and army and state newspapers like Al-Thawra and Al-Jumhuriya.[3] What remains unclear is what audiovisual material has been returned to public institutions since 2003, what remains displaced and what is currently held in each institution. While researching the lootings, I came across only one committee that was formed in 2003 to investigate the theft of the Radio and Television archives, yet their findings were never published.[4]

3 Mustafa Sa'doun, 'Stolen Iraqi Memory' in Al Arabi Al Jadeed, 2019. https://www.alaraby.co.uk/ذاكرة-العراق-المنهوبة-آمال-مفقودة-لاستعادة-أرشيف-الإذاعة-والتلفزيون

4 Mustafa Sa'doun, 'Stolen Iraqi Memory'.

Ba’thara

The interviewees of this text include Mahdi Abbas, a film historian and VHS collectors like Ali Sadik and Marwan Ali. They unanimously use the term ba’thara (dispersal) to describe what characterises Iraqi audiovisual archives today – a condition of separating and moving apart at different intervals across a wide space without order or regularity. It particularly describes the predicament of institutional audiovisual archives, and points beyond the mayhem of 2003 to an ongoing institutional failure to retrieve, maintain and give the public access to the contents of the archive.[5] It is worth noting that a few private collectors have emerged since 2003. They allegedly have original archival material relating to film, television and performing arts yet the provenance of the material is unknown, raising speculations about the collectors’ connection to what was displaced from public institutions in 2003. Besides the often unknown circumstances under which the collectors acquire this audiovisual material, what we have here is also an issue of privatisation where the archive has become a commodity.

In this way the archive is cut out of circulation and is subjected to deterioration due to unsuitable storage practices in private collections.

Nonetheless fragments of Iraqi audiovisual material dating to pre-2003 have surfaced over the years in cyberspace, circulating across social media platforms and communication apps. The digital clips range between excerpts and complete material of film, television and performing arts such as music, dance and theatre plays. For the purposes of this text I am mostly interested in the YouTube channels of individuals such as Ali Sadik, Marwan Ali, Dureid Abdulwahab among others who regularly publish content they refer to as ‘archival’ from their own private collections of VHS tapes.

5 Ala Al Mafraji, ‘Mahdi Abbas: on lack of strategies to document the cultural legacy in Iraq’.

A Detour

While satellite dishes were completely banned under Saddam Hussein's rule (1979-2003), the state owned four channels. To fulfil daily programming demands, state media relied heavily on local productions, such as films, drama, theatre plays, music and shows. Saddam Hussein saw the media as one of the revolutionary democratic means for "enlightening, informing the people and acting as a surveillant."[6] Yet just like his modern predecessors, Saddam inherited the difficult task of creating a unified sense of national identity, and concealing the inorganic succession of power by staging a sense of historical continuity. Saddam's Project for the Rewriting of History came to present a vision of national identity and local heritage as a fusion of pan-Arabism and Iraqi nationalism which derives its glory from the country's Mesopotamian history – a glorious past that most Iraqis would relate to regardless of ethnicity or religion.[7]

Cultural production and history writing were therefore deployed "to create a new and convincing vernacular" for a heterogeneous community.[8]

In Al That Al Jareeha (Wounded Essence), Selim Matar writes that Iraqi national identity has been 'brittle' throughout the modern history of Iraq due to the way in which national history got divided by successive regimes into several periods with no coherent links, which ultimately excluded many sects and ethnicities in society.[9] Matar expresses that while Iraqis may share similar habits and practices in their day to day life, they lack a common historical affiliation.[10] He cautions that as the community struggles continuously to access their spiritual and material heritage due to ruptures, erasures, displacements, their heritage becomes stranger, more mysterious and more sacred.[11]

6 Saddam Hussein, Democracy is a Comprehensive View of Life, Republic of Iraq Documentary Series No. 61, 1977, p. 8.

7 Negar Azimi, 'Saddam Hussein And The State As Sculpture' in On Democracy By Saddam Hussein (ed. Paul Chan) 2012, p.97.

8 Negar Azimi, 'Saddam Hussein And The State As Sculpture', p.96.

9 Selim Matar, Al That Al Jareeha: Ishkalat Al Hawiyya Fi Al 'Iraq Wa Al 'Alam Al 'Arabi (Wounded Essence: Problems of Identity in Iraq and the Arab World), 1997, p.127-128.

10 Selim Matar, Al That Al Jareeha, p.363.

11 Selim Matar, Al That Al Jareeha, p.284.

Still from Muqtatafat Min Ma'araket Al Hawassim, 2003
(source: Omar Al Kazemi, 2020).

One of the last televised coverages in 2003 was a program titled Ma'arekat Al Hawassim (The Decisive Battle) documenting the efforts of Iraqi forces to combat the US-led invasion. Shortly after, television broadcast blacked out completely during the fall of the government, resuming a few months later with a four hour program consisting of daily reports on life after the fall, local songs and news headlines authored by US officials.[12] As the trade sanctions were lifted, satellite dishes found their way into Iraqi households giving people access to regional and international content for the first time ever.

While official archives were displaced from institutions and the main source for the dissemination of Iraqi cultural production (i.e. state television) stopped, Iraqis were cut off from the pre-2003 era. This created a gap between the past and the present, challenging Iraqis' ability to position themselves in time or in relation to a memory that guarantees continuity between the past and the future.[13] This tremor in historical continuity disrupted the transmission of knowledge and experience.

12 'Iraqi TV Resumes With A trial Broadcast Under American Supervision' in Al Jazeera, 15 March 2002.

https://www.aljazeera.net/culture/2003/5/15/التلفزيون-العراقي-يستأنف-بثه

13 To articulate the rupture that the Iraqi community experienced in 2003, I paraphrase a line from André Habib, Survivances du Voyage en Italie, p. 74, cited by Ghadda Al Sayygh in "An Ba'dh Al Mafaheem Al Taqwfiqiyah' in Kalamon, 2011. http://www.kalamonreview.org/articles-details-112#axzz7ot4bQhug.

VHS Tapes

Still from Al Layla Layltak, 2000
(source: Ali Sadik Archive, 2016)

In 2016, Ali Sadik Al Amily uploaded an episode of the show Al Layla Layltak (Tonight is Yours 2000) onto YouTube. He originally taped it for a relative who features in the show. Following the success of the first post, Ali published most of his own collection of VHS tapes which mainly consisted of pre-2003 television shows and music videos as well as commercial home releases of Iraqi films and cartoons. He quickly became a community manager of a popular social media page called 'Ali Sadik Archive.' To meet growing public demand, Ali now buys what's referred to as sharwa – big batches of VHS tapes from flea markets. The tapes mostly come from Iraqi households and are sold by a network of secondhand dealers in Al Maydan, Bab Al Sharji, Souq Mraidi and Souq Al Haraj in Baghdad. When talking to Ali's partner however she complained to me that along with tapes come dead cockroaches due to poor storage conditions. Hearing this Ali shrugged and described instead the extreme joy he feels when he can extract four to five usable clips from a batch of hundreds of tapes. He is amazed that these tapes survived the extreme climate of the country when many are past their lifespan expectancy.

Ali Sadik's home collection of VHS tapes, Baghdad 2022
(source: Reman Sadani).

Ali believes that the establishment of Al Shabab TV (Youth TV) in 1993, which was a TV station owned by Uday Saddam Hussein, prompted households to tape more often due to the variety of its programming. When Iraqis had no access to any international productions as a result of the trade sanctions (1990-2003), Al Shabab TV served as a source of entertainment. Although reasons for taping vary, I am particularly amused by the thought that much of the Iraqi television content surfacing online was taped for leisure, to be consumed outside of official broadcasting hours and when free from commitments such as work. At the same time, a few of the tapes point to the labour of women. Marwan Ali, a VHS collector I interviewed, tells me of a few football matches he published which were recorded regularly by a woman for her partner to watch after work.

Still from Shma'na Enti?, 1994 (source: Ali Sadik Archive, 2022).

The archival content found online is incomplete. It offers fragments of what personal collectors allowed access to so far. A title song of a show could be uploaded but not the full episode, and if a few full episodes were to be found, their chronology may not be discernible. Being a big fan of the musician Ismael Al Farwachi, Ali tells me that he always dreamt of finding Ismael's music video Shma'na Enti? (Why You? 1994). Three minutes and seventeen seconds were all he could find in 2019 and it was not until 2022 that he managed to find the full clip. The two versions of Shma'na Enti? are published on Ali's channel pointing to different stages of him gathering content. In fact the clips had been recorded from two different sources. The short clip is a clean copy while the complete one has the logo of Al Shabab TV and on-screen messages from those who requested the song including the names of the people they dedicate it to.

The Double

In The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster Jalal Toufic applies a quantum theory of time to propose that we live in "a block universe of spacetime, where nothing physically passes and vanishes, but where occasionally things [i.e. tradition] withdraw[s] due to surpassing disasters."[14] In a surpassing disaster, certain texts, moving images, musical works, paintings, buildings as well as "the holiness/specialness of certain spaces" withdraw immaterially despite surviving collateral damage.[15] In response, individuals may engage in detecting the withdrawal, resurrecting what became withdrawn or abolishing tradition altogether if they cannot resurrect a thing.[16] However, nothing can guarantee the origin of what is resurrected. And this uncertainty invites us to contend with 'the double' which "insinuates a distance between the one or the thing that has been resurrected and himself/herself/itself."[17]

In the case of Iraqi VHS collections, these magnetic memories are literally 'the double' of an original archive stuck at a conjuncture of loss, institutional enclosure and privatisation. This 'double' emerges from personal collections bearing glitches, faded hues and receding details that mark passages of time, revealing an informal archival resource that had been created in parallel to the institutional one.

The 2003-moment in Iraq which saw the collapse of the Baath party, an invasion and a rushed attempt to form a new government amid a hasty process of de-Baathification, resulted in a rupture in which the transmission of knowledge and experience was disrupted, widening the gap between 'pre' and 'post' 2003 Iraq. I believe that the ongoing institutional negligence of audiovisual archives in Iraq induces their immaterial withdrawal. It indicates that the authority is unable to integrate, into the present, what survived from pre-2003.

14 Jalal Toufic, The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster 2009, p.73.

15 Jalal Toufic, The Withdrawal of Tradition, p.11.

16 Jalal Toufic in an Ashkal Alwan seminar blurb, 2014 https://ashkalalwan.org/program.php?category=4&id=226

17 Jalal Toufic, The Withdrawal of Tradition, p.30.

For example, in 2020 the US returned to Iraq Baath paper archives which included personnel files of party members and citizen reports, which were originally removed by Coalition Forces in 2005.[18] Despite hopes for the paper archives to serve as a 'historical resource' for reconciling societal divisions, it was received by several Iraqis as a 'reckless' move.19 As such, government officials decided to store the documents in a secret location due to doubts over the country's readiness to face its past especially when national reconciliation is yet to take place.20

I am unsure where else to go with Jalal Toufic's conception of The Withdrawal of Tradition, but I find myself returning to the potentialities of 'the double', and particularly to what Jalal articulates as a 'distance' between the resurrected thing and its essence.

In a presentation of The Withdrawal of Tradition, Walid Sadik draws attention to the Arabic term 'esti'naf' (to start again) directly followed by the question: 'how do you mend that which has been ruptured?' Walid does not give a definitive answer but implicitly proposes a practice of "convers[ing] over the gap."[21]

Still from Mahad Hichalak, 1994 (source: Ali Sadik Archive, 2022).

18 Michael R. Gordon, 'Baath Party Archives Return to Iraq, With the Secrets They Contain', in The Wall Street Journal 2020. https://www.wsj.com/articles/baath-party-archives-return-to-iraq-with-the-secrets-they-contain-11598907600

19 Kanan Makiya in 'Baath Party Archive Return to Iraq'.

20 'Return of Baath Paper Archives Triggers Old Wounds' in Rudaw 2020. https://www.rudawara-bia.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/110920202

21 'Walid Sadek representing Jalal Toufic' Lecture presented at Festival International de Film et Vidéo de Création. Beirut, 5 March 2006' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKpmHB9Taig

A few instances of conversing over the gap can be seen in Ali Sadik's Youtube channel. In the comments on a recently published music video titled Mahad Hichalak (Nobody Told You, 1994) by Khalid Al-Iraqi, an audience member thanks Ali for the video describing it as a 'beautiful memory,' while someone else points out the physique of the musician, stating that most youth were thin in the nineties due to the conditions of the sanctions. Another person recalls that the leather jacket, which the musician wears, was expensive at the time. Someone else lists other songs by the musician and drops Ali a request to find them. Two other people speculate about the video's production date, concluding that it should have been 1994. The interactive nature of social media invites audiences to exchange personal and collective memories, providing valuable insights into viewership habits and the affective quality of archival material.

Still from Al Bo'd Al Rabi' d. Victor Haddad, 1983 (source: Ali Sadik Archive).

Unavoidably, there is a complex sense of nostalgia that surrounds these archival clips.[22] During the interviews, Marwan Ali and Ali Sadik both describe to me that their fascination with Iraqi music was the impetus to collect more VHS tapes, with Ali expressing how a song could take him back to a childhood memory that reduces him to tears. A documentary film titled Al Bo'd Al Rabi' (The Fourth Dimension d. Victor Haddad, 1983) that depicts everyday life in the eighties receives touching comments on Ali's YouTube channel. Audiences describe an irretrievable time and a sense of disbelief over the deterioration of the country. A few people reflect on their present, drawing comparisons along changes in architecture, mobility, cultural production and economic growth, pointing to the failures of the current Iraqi government. Others express Baathist sentiments while the rest point to aborted dreams and possibilities due to the leadership of the Baath. In the case of other clips, differing political views quickly escalate into conflict, which Ali Sadik and Marwan Ali curb by turning comments off or steering away from political content altogether.

22 I use the notion of 'nostalgia' here to refer to 'a yearning for a different time' as understood by Svetlana Boym in The Future of Nostalgia, 2001.

Still from Law ‘Endi Hadh Wyak, date unknown (source: Ali Sadik Archive, 2022)

Ali Sadik’s creative contributions are another instance of conversing over the gap. Among the published archival content on his channel, you find original covers of classic Iraqi songs performed by Ali himself on an acoustic guitar.[23] In another example, Ali edits together found material to create a music video for Ra’ed George’s song Law ‘Endi Hadh Wyak (If I were lucky), to which audience members respond by recounting the original music video.

It is rather exciting to witness how viewership can stimulate a conversation across the gap where the archival comes in contact with the personal. I would like to borrow from John Akomfrah to articulate what is unfolding here.

“One begins to understand that embracing the archival is not so much about finding the past or somebody else’s past, but instead the beginnings of self or the beginnings of one’s own claim on that past.”[24] Akomfrah expands the idea to suggest that in invoking memory, the archival opens a passage through which individuals come in dialogue with their culture to find themselves.

As to the sustainability of VHS collections, there are a few infrastructural challenges at hand. Secondhand dealers are demanding higher prices for tapes due to growing demand, while collectors struggle to provide the necessary storage conditions. Technology tends to be a challenge too since the taped content is processed using old devices which are no longer in circulation and are difficult to maintain. On the other hand, collectors have started to explore other dissemination possibilities like selling to private television stations such as Dijla Zaman, as their dependency on social media makes them vulnerable to hacking as well as intellectual property and copyright issues.

23 See Ma Nsaitak 2022, Yali Rihti (2022), Droub El Safar (2018).

24 John Akomfrah, ‘Memory and the Morphologies of Difference’ in Politics of Memory: Documentary and Archive (ed. Marco Scontine and Elisabetta Galasso) 2017, p.29.

Yet, in the vast and hidden infrastructure of the television channel, collectors are no longer credited for their work. The channel only publishes what is clean, complete, and does not run the risk of aggravating the status quo.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that while television archives extracted from VHS tapes are wonderful windows into cultural productions in Iraq, they point to what had been excluded from production or distribution in the first place. However, I conclude this text freed from the urgency to work against the forces of loss and dispersal, having accepted them as inherent conditions to archives as well as the Iraqi community's complex relation to the past. When Iraqi national history is fragmented and historical affiliations are divergent, official archives serve as only one possibility toward accessing the past, sparing us from waiting for the institution to maintain the archive or create it in the first place. Just like the VHS collectors, I shift my attention to personal collections and alternative claims on the past. Yet I recommend more efforts to be invested in exhibiting archival content in offline spaces to facilitate communal revisions of the past. I hope to explore this strand further in future research. In addition, I hope to locate the labour of women in processes of generating, collecting and preserving personal and institutional archives.

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Hijacking Absence: On Queer Viewing Practices of Arab Films

By Iskandar Abdalla

Fathia is cast by an evil spell. Cairo becomes a siren that calls and pulls her away from the embrace of the vast rural meadows, off to a world of glitz, glamor and dazzling lures. Once there, the city becomes a risky maze where she is subjected to recurring violence. But Fathia embraces her destiny, willingly following the mighty call that turns her being on its head, indifferent to the sea of losses she leaves behind.

Poster of al-Nadaha or For Whom the Wind Calls by Hussein Kamal (1975)

Fathia (Magda al-Sabahi) is the main protagonist in *al-Naddaha* or *For Whom the Wind Calls* (1975) by Egyptian director Hussein Kamal. The film is an adaptation of a famous novel by Youssef Idris. When I invited a group of queer Arab friends to my place in Berlin for a movie night, the choice of *al-Naddaha* was not necessarily deliberate. However, a desire to re-ignite intimate attachments to past homes was what we all determinedly wanted, and an iconic Egyptian melodrama seemed like a good way to fulfill that desire for intimacy and satisfy our yearning for a kind of catharsis. Fathia's dreams, her fears, her bafflement and fascination with a lustrous modern city seemed to correspond in paradoxical ways to our relationship with Berlin as migrant queer Arabs. Indeed, after watching (or rather rewatching) the film, we reached the conclusion that "we are all Fathia; we all have been sceptered in one way or another

[by Berlin],” as has been noted by one of my friends. We then started to discuss the film, each person elaborating on personal haunting specters with earnest passion, which left a cathartic impression on us as we shared experiences, familiar references, and our collective longing to belong.

After that night, I began organizing regular movie nights to which I invited my queer friends to watch Egyptian and Arab films. Following the screenings, we would have semi-moderated discussions. I thought about recording these discussions or coming up with a protocol for how to run them. I wanted to transform the discussions into a collaborative publication, multimedia content or compiling them into a digital archive. It was not merely the cathartic potential of collectively viewing films that motivated me, I was also curious about the methodological implications such an act of recording entails. Is it possible to come up with a queer method for engaging with films on the basis of such discussions? Can we make sense of Fathia’s story through a queer reading? Can we engage with iconic films in ways that reflect and speak to the sensibilities of queer Arabs — an audience whose feelings and desires have been largely ignored or deliberately misrepresented by Arab cinema? What modes, formats and practices of reception are required for a queer viewing of Arab cinema? This essay is an initial attempt to engage with such questions by presenting some of the theoretical assumptions that underpin them. By doing so, I hope to lay foundational grounds that would guide subsequent processes of data gathering and analysis.

Imagination Instead of Representation

Much ink has been spilled on how queer and non-normative sexualities in Arab cinema have been represented (Menicucci 1998; Habib 2007; Hayon 2018; Shadeedi 2018). Entering keywords like "homosexuality" and "Arab Cinema" in any search engine will take you to dozens of articles and film reviews that analyze how homosexual and gender non-conforming characters appear in Arab films across time. Yet, in all the contributions I came across, Hussien Kamal's oeuvre is entirely absent. The reason for this is not difficult to guess. Kamal's films might have featured numerous agonized female characters like Fathia, who are weighed down by gendered social norms, or belittled by toxic and selfish men, but they never feature homosexuality. But *Al-Naddaha* is actually an exception, as it features the stock character of *sabi al-ʿalmah*, named Khukha (played by Sayyf Allah Mukhtar), an effeminized entertainer who accompanies female belly dancers.

If we follow the rationale of representation prevalent in many writings about homosexuality in Arab cinema, Khukha's character, not Fathia's, would be the main focus of our attention as queer viewers, regardless of his marginality to the plot. One queer viewer might then celebrate Khukha's daring queer attire and vocabulary, seeing it as an intended provocation against prevalent gender norms. Another viewer might condemn how the filmmaker ridicules queerness through Khukha's stereotypical figuration and a third queer viewer might even identify with such stereotypes or reproduce them as essential characterizations of effeminate Arab queerness. Can we call these modes of engaging with Khukha queer reading or viewing practices? Maybe. But in focusing on queer viewing practices, I am suggesting a model that is neither centered on picking and choosing queer characters for analysis, nor on dwelling on what films say or display at face value.

Tracking and listing (mis) representations of queer sexualities in Arab cinema can doubtlessly shed a critical light on the normative structures that underpin many films, images, aesthetics and patterns of production. It can unravel the value systems Arab cinema perpetuates and promotes and do justice to the few, but significant, attempts made by Arab filmmakers to subvert heteronormative presumptions and unsettle the firm grip of gendered norms. But this work will never change the empirical fact that the number of Arab films explicitly featuring queer characters is quite limited, and it remains undeniable that the majority of these characters are marginal, stereotypical, or treated in hostile ways.

Even when the task is to critique, to start and end with queer representations in Arab cinema is to testify to queerness as marginal, exceptional and outlandish. Such characterizations might reflect the social realities of many queer Arabs, but they eventually fail to provide them with cultural forms through which their personal realities can take shape as film viewers. It leaves no possibility other than alienating queer Arabs from a film history that alienates them, ruling out a whole archive of images and stories as dissonant, if not hostile, to queer feelings. Are there alternative ways to reclaim this archive through queer viewing practices instead of banishing it?

Alexander Doty's handling of American mass culture might be instructive here. Instead of proceeding from queerness as something demonstratively represented within cultural texts or a property waiting to be discovered, he considers it a product of certain acts of reception or reading practices. In this view, queering mass culture is not just to infer queerness from what is displayed, but to challenge "the politics of denotation and connotation […] traditionally deployed in discussing texts and representation" (Doty 1997, xii). By extension, a queer politics cannot be solely based on demanding recognition within the dominant realms of representation, but it also involves dismantling and repurposing their logics. Representation is neither the sign nor the agent of queer liberation — it is the use and reuse of mass culture that reveals and translates queerness. Queerness becomes implicit within any cultural text as soon as queer practices of reading

and modes of engagement that dwell on mutating their meaning are activated. Doty would even go so far as to disapprove of deeming such modes and practices "alternative." He rather "alternativizes" heterosexual models of engagement:

> I've got news for straight culture: your reading of texts are usually "alternative" ones for me, and they often seem like desperate attempts to deny the queerness that is so clearly a part of mass culture (Doty 1997, xii).

But how do we relate to a text in ways that are at odds with its logic of representation? How can we name what the text represses and render visible what it conceals or dismisses? Imagination here would be the method. Imagination is a queer refuge. It is a means to creatively counterbalance alienation, to shift the world's forms and vocabulary in ways that render them more bearable, cordial enough to accommodate wayward desires and banished difference. The imagination to be practiced here is not conceived of in the Cartesian sense as a purely cognitive process that takes place formlessly within the inner realms of a thinking self, but as a practice that performatively unfolds in relation to concrete references (films), and collectively unfolds with other queer viewers who have interrelated feelings and experiences and share the same history of absence and repression.

Imagination forms a substantial component in the process of producing and reading images. Through and in relation to films, imagination has often been mobilized as a tool for forging group identities and reifying collective sentiments. On screen, fabricated accounts about the nation and its history often become a tangible reality, and pasts we never lived are vividly evoked as if they have always been ours (Landsberg 2004; Abdalla 2023). The kind of imagination utilized in queer viewing practices inevitably feeds on and cultivates a sense of [queer] collectivity. It does so, however, not from a position of power, but from one that empowers. It is a vision for existence otherwise, not existence as it should be (cf. Hartman 2019)—a counter-imagination that recoils from hegemonic scripts of being, that envisions new forms in the very act of dismantling present ones, that revisits the past for the sake of its alteration rather than its

restoration, and that identifies only to disidentify in the same move (Muñoz 1998). When a gay man, for example, evokes Fathia's journey — not Khukha's — as a narrative vehicle to ponder his personal journey and draft his own story, he simultaneously disidentifies with both characters' deterministic scripts of gender and dislodges the character of Fathia from the heteronormative logic that brought her about and dictated her choices. For queer imagination to freely unfurl, intimate spheres of life, personal feelings and desires must be called upon to play their part in reconstituting being and shifting the realms of meaning.

Anf wa thalat ʿuyun or A Nose and Three Eyes by Hussein Kamal 1972

Shifting the Realms of Meaning

It goes without saying that viewers always engage their personal experiences and intimate feelings while watching a film. Nothing is per se queer about this. The work of British film critic Robin Wood, who was one of the pioneers in conceptualizing what can be called, in hindsight, "queer film analysis," is however worth recalling in this regard. Wood notably alluded to the close connection between any film critic's interpretive practices — and by proxy, any film viewer's — and their personal life (Wood 1978). Keeping this in mind, a queer engagement with Arab cinema would then not shy away from the intimate and personal and would not assume that filmic texts bear predetermined meanings that can be accessed objectively. On the contrary, contemplating the intimate and personal would become the main vehicle towards accessing meaning, or, in better wording, towards creating meaning in the first place. Even more, if we conceive of collective film viewing in an intimate queer setting, not just as an interpretive endeavor, but as a collective ritualized activity, then not only would the meanings of films shift in relation to the experiences of (queer) viewers, but also in relation to the position of the viewing subjects vis-a-vis the films. In ritualizing the act of viewing, films function at once as *texts* that can be decoded in a variety of ways and as *pretexts* by which alternative horizons of belonging and freer possibilities of being can be forged (Abdalla 2020). Let's put it another way. When viewing is understood as a ritualized collective act, the hermeneutical model that presumes a viewing subject vis-à-vis a separate viewed object that is pre-charged with meanings that each viewer alone tries to understand is transcended. Viewers' relationships with each other become part of the hermeneutic space of viewing and the ritual gives way to a form of *hermeneutic of the self*. With and against the grain of the filmic fiction, and through modes of (dis) identification with its narrative, characters and aesthetic, viewers engage in fabulations of meaning and a recreation of being. At this point, however, it is useful to ask first: what does the notion of ritualization imply here, and how far can it be analytically useful?

Film Viewing As a Queer Ritual

Theories about rituals have been the subject of long heated debates among anthropologists. A primary idea that underpins conceptions of rituals, from Durkheim to Geertz, is that rituals are communicative acts. These acts symbolize a transcendental meaning in contrast to mundane acts that are meaningful in themselves because they serve reasonable or practical ends (Mitchell 2017). The problem with such understanding, however, is that it presumes a quintessential separation between ritual acts on one hand, and meaning on the other. I am trying to problematize precisely such a separation by claiming the centrality of the ritual of queer collective film viewing to the process of creating meaning.

Talal Asad, inspired by the work of Marcel Mauss, allows us to think of rituals not in terms of the symbolic meanings they mediate but the embodied practices (including language) they involve, which are meaningful in themselves as techniques to experience oneself and learn about social norms (Asad 1993). Following this line of thought, actions thus become “analytically ‘prior’ and in no way subordinate to the conceptual process of meaning-making” (Mitchell 2017, 380). Emphasizing actions and embodiments would lead us to think about acts — any acts — as prone to ritualization, rather than identifying abstract distinctive features of what constitutes a ritual. Ritualization can be understood as a social practice that centers the body as a site within which norms are negotiated and through which meaning is sensed and re-created via a set of performative strategies (cf. Mitchell 2017). To ritualize the act of viewing and discussing an Arab film in an intimate queer crowd is to center bodily desires, sensations and expressions and to capitalize on Arab queer experiences, vocabularies and affective registers in order to engage with popular cinema.

Queer Viewing Is a Queer Act

Queering popular cinema is not just a specific mode of interpreting films but a way of acting *upon* or *in relation* to film narratives. Cultural and performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz theorized "queer acts" as an epistemological stance that grounds a whole project of "queer worldmaking" (Muñoz 1996, 6). Muñoz proposes to understand queerness as "a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality," instead of adhering to rigorous identitarian notions (ibid). He hopes, with such understanding, to empower queer subjects as agents in remaking a world that pushes them out to its margins. In doing so, they enact "counter-publics through alternative modes of culture-making […] surpassing the play of interpretation […] by focusing on what acts do in a social matrix" (ibid. 12). Watching a film together can be a social occasion in which one jointly acts and feels. It remains so even when we watch in silence and before delving into discussion. Silence does not imply an absence of collectivity, but can rather be regarded as a sign of a joint intention to share a certain experience while temporarily bringing our individual verbal expressions to a halt (Hanich 2014). A subsequent discussion of the film that allows personal memories, intimate sentiments and bodily expressions to unfold, that grants imagination authorization to re-create meaning and re-enact being, can constitute a queer tool to act upon filmic representations.

To do this is not to entirely discharge popular films from the specificities of their contexts or from the intentions of their authors and producers, but rather to acknowledge these popular films' potential as templates for enacting alternative modes of being — a potential primarily activated through acts of reception. It lies in the creativity of (queer) viewers to invest cultural texts with new lives and endow them with signs and references that are not their own. To act upon films queerly is to travel with them across distant futures, to let their characters and stories inhabit foreign lands and bodies, to render them into visual palimpsests on which queer absences can be

overwritten, thus hijacking the heterosexual logic of dominant modes of representation.
If the mastery of a ritual invests the person with the power to order and reorder the world, to “generate culture deftly […] in peculiar tension with other forms of cultural production” (Bell 1990, 306), then the mastery of a queer viewing ritual invests the subject with the power to put a spell on silence, to conjure up the ghosts of absent queer desires. It is to “listen to the unsaid”(Hartman 2008, 3) and narrate the impossible.

Dammy wa dumʿuy wa ʾibtisamati or My Blood, My Tears and My Smile by Hussein Kamal, 1973.

The Queer "Conversational Theater": A Prospective Epilogue

American poet Vachel Lindsay published one of the first books on film theory in 1915. In *The Art of the Moving Pictures*, Lindsay puts down an optimistic vision for the future of film. He hopes for the art of cinema to counteract "the capitalist and industrialized society that produced it," and replace recreational and religious rituals with civic ones (Decherney 2005, 21). Entrusting cinema with such a mission, however, required a revolution not only in the content of films but also in the venues available for their exhibition. Accordingly, Lindsay introduced an exhibition venue that would be suitable for the role he envisaged for cinema in the future, calling it "the conversational theater." At the theater's door and before the screening starts, each viewer is handed a card with the following information:

> You are encouraged to discuss the picture with the friend who accompanies you to this place. Conversation, of course, must be sufficiently subdued not to disturb the stranger who did not come with you to the theater (Lindsay 1916, 197).

In this theater of films, viewers are encouraged to watch while discussing or discuss while watching. Lindsay wrote his book when films were silent, so this would not have been a source of trouble. Exhibition and reception become intimately interwoven, and conveying meaning coincides with re-creating it in a collective civic ritual. Lindsay had a precise idea about the kind of questions the viewers are supposed

to discuss, but what interests me is the form he suggests for the conversations, not their thematics. We cannot conceive of queer viewing practices without queering the settings and conditions of exhibition, without venturing to introduce forms of film display and dissemination that render films hijackable or malleable enough to be acted upon in the ways I suggest above. The model Lindsay suggests seems to offer inspiration for what can yet be done, anchoring some of the main ideas introduced in this essay in the history of film theory as possibilities for collective viewing practices, even if they remain insufficiently explored so far. At the same time, many ideas remain open for future scrutiny, from the technical and spatial arrangements of exhibition sites, to the structure of discussions and the formats, virtual or physical, needed to turn these discussions into platforms for performing and articulating the process of queering Arab cinema.

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Iskandar Abdalla

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Issues and Challenges Regarding the Local Distribution of Egyptian Independent Cinema

By Valentina Villani

This article focuses on the local distribution, circulation, and exhibition of independent Egyptian cinema. While independent Egyptian films have received awards at many international film festivals[1], these films are rarely distributed on the national scene. Seeking to better understand the reasons behind this issue, this contribution, through interviews[2] with film experts and practitioners, presents an overview on distribution channels that operate in Egypt and the issues that distributors and filmmakers face when locally distributing alternative films.

After introducing the overabundance of terms used to describe these films and why it matters to locally distribute them, this article first analyses challenges associated with making films in Egypt, and further it presents the core research findings on the distribution of independent films in the Egyptian context and why international film festivals alone are insufficient to guarantee local distribution for these kinds of films. Lastly, this contribution ends with a set of ideas drawn from the interviewees about other possible distribution pathways.

Before introducing the issues of distribution, it is crucial to highlight that a plethora of terms exists to describe non-traditional films. Attempts to understand these terms and to define their filmmaking styles and narratives are fraught with challenges. In fact, even my interlocutors do not agree on which is the more appropriate term to define non-traditional films because the choice of term is often subjective. They have referred to this kind of cinema as “independent,”

1 For example, Ain Shams/Eye of the Sun (El Batout, 2007) won the Best Film Award in 2008 at the Taormina and Carthage Film Festivals. Microphone (Abdallah, 2010) premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2010 and won the Golden Tanit at the Carthage Film Festival, among others. And Akher Ayyam el-Madinah/In the Last Day of the City (El Said, 2016) scooped the Grand Prix and the Jury of Youth Best Film Award at the Festival des 3 Continents in France.

2 The results of this research are drawn from interviews with film experts and practitioners, who I immensely thank for generously spending their precious time to answer my questions, despite their busy schedules. Youssef Shazly is the managing director at the Cairo art house Zawya, while Ahmed Sobky is the head of distribution; Hala Lotfy is the founder of Hassala Productions, a collectively run production company; and Alaa Karkouti is the CEO of the distribution company MAD Solutions. Additional interviewees included Mariz Kelada, a film studies scholar, former coordinator of the Jesuits Cairo Film School, and PhD student whose research focuses on precarious labourers in the Egyptian cinema industry and Maggie Morgan, filmmaker and film studies professor at the American University in Cairo.

"alternative," "art-house cinema," "new cinema," "non-mainstream," "non-commercial," or as "new wave cinema." In response to this abundance of terms, I have decided not to adopt any one specific term in this article. Instead, I refer to these movies using a range of terms, including the ones used by my interlocutors.

The main characteristics that these films have in common are analysed in Muhammad Mamduh's *The Democracy of a Medium: The Rise of Independent Cinema in Egypt* (2007), a book that can be seen as a turning point in the use of the term "independent films" in the Egyptian context. According to Mamduh, "independent films" opt for alternative and more realistic styles of storytelling and utilise low-budget techniques and unknown actors. For instance, Ibrahim El Batout in *Ithaki* (2005) and *Ain Shams/Eye of the Sun* (2008) as well as Ahmed Abdallah in *Heliopolis* (2009) ignored commercial market considerations and used digital cameras, non-professional actors, and personally funded their films. One of the key contributing factors to the increase in realistic approaches was the digital transformation of the industry that took place in the early 2000s. In fact, affordable film equipment and universally accessible sharing platforms were indisputable game changers for the production of low-budget films, whose production and distribution did not rely on the star system or popular genres (Ghazal, 2020, p. 9).

At this point, it is fundamental to ask why it matters that alternative films are shown locally. Over the course of our conversation, most of my interlocutors declared that distributing non-mainstream cinema means sharing unique Egyptian voices and narratives that are often unheard and absent from commercial cinema. In fact, independent filmmakers fight back against the mainstream, telling new stories about, for instance, societal problems. Moreover, avoiding the traditional tropes and melodramatic representations of "the Hollywood film-making style that dominates Egyptian cinema," allows these films to speak to viewers on a more realistic and personal level (Ghazal, 2020, p. 11).

Making movies in Egypt: Issues and obstacles

The first issue when it comes to making films anywhere in the world is financing, and this is especially true for the Egyptian alternative film industry. Scarcity of funds is one of the main reasons various filmmakers are not able to produce many films. Egyptian independent filmmakers rely on rare state funding, such as that offered by the Ministry of Culture Film Fund, or compete for contributions from national and regional film festivals, or cultural initiatives such as the Arab Fund for Art and Culture (AFAC). Unfortunately, according to my interlocutors, initiatives like these are not enough, and competition for funding is fierce.

Even if a filmmaker accepts working with a small budget, there is another concern that often discourages filmmakers from starting to work on a film: permits to shoot in open air are notoriously difficult to obtain (see figure 1). The decisive involvement of state-regulated institutions in film production in Egypt—such as for instance the Ministry of Interior, the Censorship Authority, the Cinematic Syndicate and the prefecture—means that filmmakers are required to obtain a range of different permits which are only required when shooting in external locations or when the camera is aimed outside at the street through a window (El Khachab, 2017). This fact discourages many from even entertaining the idea of film production in Egypt. Of course, there are those that try to bypass the system entirely. It is not uncommon for filmmakers to make films illegally or in secret (El Kachef, 2015).

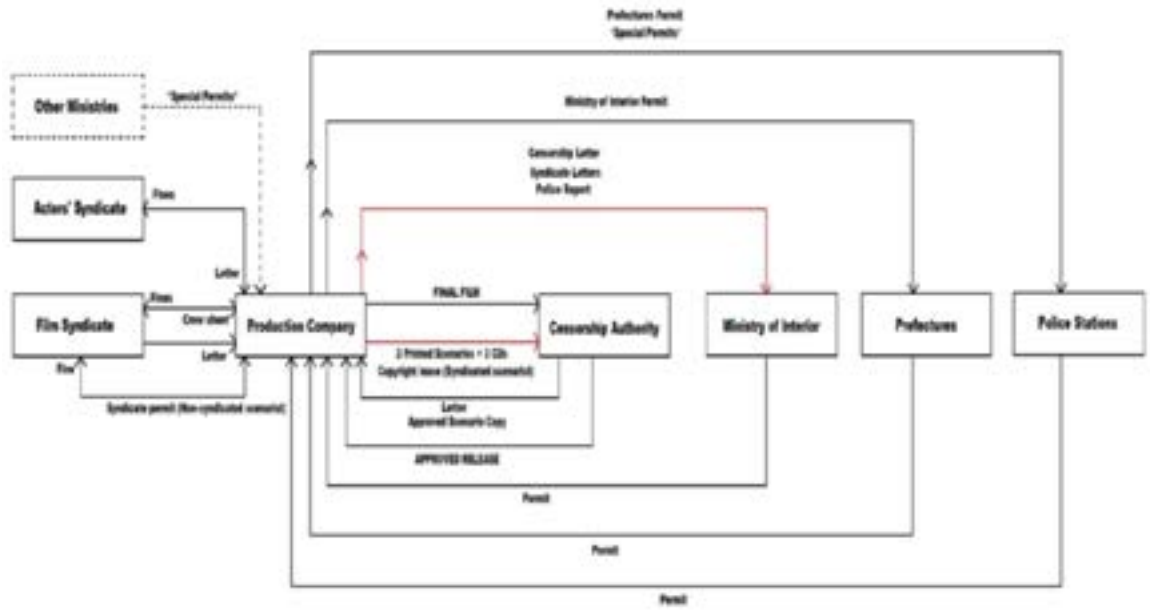

Figure 1. The Permit-Making Process (El Khachab, 2016, p. 75)

Censorship is another key issue when making films in Egypt. The Censorship Authority operates in Egypt through legal restrictions that often weigh more heavily on subversive storylines created by minority filmmakers or those working outside of commercial cinema. Moreover, this leads to a "form of self-censorship" because non-conventional storytelling is made unimaginable. Hence, the Censorship Authority functions on two different levels: on the one hand it works on a formal level via laws and regulations, and on the other hand it controls the industry on an informal level via self-censorship (El Khachab, 2017). Further, self-censorship is also amplified by the presence of conservative audiences who might discredit the filmmaker on public channels, such as social media or television, for voicing or expressing any non-traditional ideas (Morgan, 2021, pers. comm). Lastly, film production in Egypt is also very often constrained by copious forms of "informal control" (El Khachab, 2017, p.1) that have nothing to do with the state, such as people who disrupt the set.

Distribution processes and issues

Most of the interlocutors in this research lamented that the problems associated with independent film distribution in Egypt are vast and often seem insurmountable. The anthropologist and media scholar Chehab El Khachab explains that lack of access to local distribution channels is the main economic inequality between the commercial and independent sides of the Egyptian film industry. Among other concerns, he believes this is due to the "star system." In fact, independent movies cannot afford to have stars in their productions, especially male stars who cost more than female ones. Distributors are rarely tempted to distribute these movies because they do not want to take the risk of distributing a film with an alternative plot and without any well-known Egyptian actors (El Khachab, 2021).

An equally pressing problem is that the distribution system in Egypt operates as a closed circle or "monopoly," and it can entirely wreck the future of a film's exhibition if it has not curried favour with the right people (Khan in Lebow, 2016). In fact, the Egyptian cinema industry depends on an "interpersonal political economy" that includes both the commercial and independent cinema sectors as well as the media sector. The three often share the same labour market and infrastructure. Hence, everyone knows everyone else, and individuals instead of companies have "a monopoly over specific professions" (El Khachab, 2021).

Another issue highlighted by the film scholar and former coordinator of the Jesuits Cairo Film School, Mariz Kelada, is the undermined circuit of circulation. Small screenings at local events and exhibitions may bring viewers, but will not bring income. While drawing large audiences may seem like a positive, the circuit style can be a double-edged sword. When a film is screened multiple times in these "lesser" circuits, it becomes associated with a lack of prestige. Further, showing a film several times can lessen its chances of being bought by platforms or TV stations. Distributors are therefore placed in the unenviable position of having to decide between making an income and at least covering production costs or making the film accessible (Kelada, 2022, pers. comm.).

According to Ahmed Sobky, head of distribution at Zawya, budgets are another big issue. Many small films are made by unknown directors and star unknown actors. In these cases, additional funding is needed to attract an audience. However, most of the budget for these types of movies goes to production, which makes distribution even more difficult. Conversely, big movies tend to have large marketing budgets to match their large production budgets. This financial inequality puts independent filmmakers on the back foot from the outset; it is a mammoth challenge to convince an audience to come and watch a movie by an unknown filmmaker with such a low marketing budget. Another major factor affecting distribution is international, regional, and national competition, as each movie has to compete with a huge amount of other independent movies coming out every year (Sobky, 2022, pers. comm.).

The CEO of MAD Solutions Alaa Karkouti emphasises the importance of doing market testing or test screenings, when possible, even if they require effort to organise. For example, he explains that in 2013, MAD Solutions distributed an Egyptian art-house film called *Rags & Tatters/Farsh wa Ghatait* (Abdallah, 2013). The film first went to the Toronto Film Festival. Before distributing it in Egypt, MAD Solutions started doing testing where 70 people from all backgrounds were shown the movie posters. By analysing the survey responses, MAD Solutions realised that it was a big risk to spend a lot of money on advertising. So, they chose to focus the advertising campaign on one main idea: the movie was only going to be screened for one week on seven screens. The film ended up staying in cinemas for five weeks, which was a huge success for the company. As Karkouti explains, every time a movie is distributed, a political and social analysis is needed to predict if its distribution will be in the company's favour. For example, when MAD Solutions distributed *Rags & Tatters*, it was right after the Egyptian revolution. At that time, a lot of people wanted to support local Egyptian art-house movies (Karkouti, 2022, pers. comm.). The social climate and the timing of a release, therefore, also play important roles and also influence the success of the distribution plan.

Karkouti also suggests that labelling films as art-house is often unhelpful. This is because there is a general

lack of knowledge about these kinds of movies in the cinema industry in Egypt. Multiplex cinemas do not want to take a chance on these films, and they do not try to understand why it is important to show them. The government recognizes how these movies can create jobs locally or gain prestige internationally, but it does not consider supporting them a priority. And art-house cinemas cannot overcome these challenges without sufficient financial backing or marketing campaigns. According to Karkouti, the industry should be aware of how society is changing and then identify who the target audience is and how to reach it (Karkouti 2022 pers. comm.). But on a limited budget, there is only so far this strategy can take us.

For Karkouti, films are businesses first and foremost. Because audiences are not yet ready to explore these types of films, they do not make a lot of money and their filmmakers cannot consequently produce new films. For this reason, he underlines that these films need the support of the government – a model practised in Europe and elsewhere around the globe. For example, cinemas in France are required to have a percentage of French movies in cinemas, and some European countries give financial support programmes to small cinemas. The Egyptian government does not approve of the way these movies commonly depict Egypt, and it does not grasp why supporting art-house films can be valuable in the long run. In fact, Karkouti reports that the only support that MAD Solutions receives from the government is a tax discount: while foreign movies are taxed at a rate of 20%, Egyptian movies only pay a 5% tax rate.

Karkouti also explains that the process of distributing an independent film in Egypt is very much linked with the concept of "trusting your gut." With limited research conducted on the subject to date, relevant data are few and far between. So, in this industry, distributors have to rely on the experience they have gained in the field (Karkouti, 2022, pers. comm.).

Another crucial question is whether distributing Egyptian alternative movies in international film festivals is useful for local distribution or not. Hala Lotfy, filmmaker and co-founder of Hassala, echoed all of the interlocutors by affirming that international film festivals are not enough to get independent Egyptian

films seen at home. Intriguingly, she thinks that being awarded at an international film festival can even prevent a film from reaching local venues. According to Lotfy, local distributors often play a role in restricting access to alternative films. By calling them “festival films,” they unwittingly diminish the value of the films by stigmatising them as unenjoyable, which may in fact be true since pleasing the audience is not generally the aim of independent filmmakers. So, while screening a film at an international film festival can bring it great publicity, when people come to watch the film in Egypt, they are often disappointed because their expectations are unmet (Lotfy, 2022, pers. comm.).

Like Lotfy, the filmmaker Maggie Morgan also found fault in the “festival film” label and agreed that it does not draw audiences to the cinema. In fact, to a general movie goer, this label means that the film is slow, hard to understand, and obscure. Sometimes the international film festival label is only flaunted as an accolade among people in the industry, but it does not draw people to the local screens. According to Morgan, audiences show up for independent films because of the alternative narratives and topics they depict and not based on their labels (Morgan, 2022, pers. comm.).

On the other hand, according to the film scholar Mariz Kelada, the local recognition of an alternative film often depends on it having first achieved international recognition, and this appreciation may in turn create other circuits of circulation and income for a filmmaker. Likewise, the managing director of Zawya, Youssef Shazly, believes that the fact that Egyptian films are presented in international festivals can only be seen as something positive. That said, some films are made with the sole intention of being shown in festivals, and they only target international audiences. According to Shazly, making local films for Western audiences is inherently problematic. The 2011 revolution, for example, was a very hot topic globally during the Arab Spring. However, some alternative films that depicted the revolution were filled with inaccuracies and failed to appreciate or even attempt to communicate the complexities of what was happening. Being tailored to audiences that did not really care about the finer details, these films missed the opportunity to authentically capture the nuance of the historical moment (Shazly, 2022, pers. comm.).

Ahmed Sobky from Zawya affirms that there is a lot of debate on this topic. He argues that when a movie premieres at an international film festival, it gets a stamp of approval from Western festivals, and consequently, it gets more opportunities in terms of distribution. However, this does not always translate to distribution opportunities back home. A lot of movies premiere at international festivals but then they do not get seen by anybody in Egypt. Having the stamp of approval of an international film festival can therefore have both negative and positive outcomes. Some people might have high expectations of the movie but get disappointed when they see it, whereas others might decide to watch a movie they would otherwise not have seen because of the international acclaim it has garnered. Sobky explains that this is a huge debate that is tied to Western people acting as gatekeepers and the ones who have the power to decide a film's fate. He believes that being screened at international film festivals should not be an independent film's only opportunity to gain traction (2022, pers. comm.).

Regarding the possibility of finding new ways to locally distribute independent films, my interlocutors reported some ideas and thoughts about possible alternative ways to distribute non-commercial films in Egypt. While "solving" the problem of independent film distribution in Egypt is not the aim of this research, these findings may nonetheless open up possible future topics of study.

The film studies scholar Mariz Kelada invites filmmakers and distributors to decide in which capacity they want to operate: Are they working in a commercial capacity? Are their efforts in service of social responsibility? Or are they pursuing popularity? Multiple steps are needed to make a film, and distribution is the last step of the circuit. So, the filmmaker's or distributor's ultimate intentions must be clear from the outset of the film's production. If a film is to inspire an underground movement, it probably needs to be popular. If it is intended to echo or inspire a cultural wave, it may need a critical audience. And these aims will affect the way in which these films are distributed (Kelada, 2022, pers. comm.).

Like Kelada, Sobky argues that the aim of the filmmakers and directors

behind the film should be prioritised above all else. The artists must have the will to keep pushing forward, while maintaining budgets and the necessary patience. While they wait for results, they need to get their priorities straight. Are they trying to reach people, make an income, get international recognition, or end up on a big platform? He explains that while so many different "solutions" have come up over the years, they always end up following the same patterns. Because without big budgets, experimenting is risky (Sobky, 2022, pers. comm.).

While some of these distribution strategies might not make the filmmakers a lot of money, they can still achieve positive outcomes. Impact distribution is one such strategy. In this instance, the aim is not to gain money from the movie. Instead of just having the audience watch the film, they interact with the audience to effect change. A good example of this strategy is the film *Lift Like a Girl* (Mayye Zayed 2020), an observational feature documentary about a young female weightlifter. For this film, the marketing campaign focused on reaching young girls in order to engage with them and talk about gender inequality in the athletic community (Sobky, 2022, pers. comm.). The strategy was successful because it ignited social dialogue on the topic.

Lotfy from Hassala explains that the Egyptian government does not wish audiences be educated, and it intentionally chooses to screen what she calls "copies of American films." Karkouti agrees that without the support of the government, it is difficult to persuade cinemas to show these movies. As a result, MAD Solution continues to use its own resources to drive independent film distribution in Egypt (Lotfy & Karkouti, 2022, pers. comm.).

Controversially, Lotfy also makes the case for the role of piracy in increasing audience numbers. She argues that strict copyright laws result from capitalism, and people in Egypt have to obey these laws only because the country was forced to sign an anti-piracy treaty to please the Western world. For Lotfy, eliminating piracy deprives the Egyptian people of their own culture (Lotfy, 2022, pers. comm.). What Lofty means here is clearly exemplified by an event that happened while producing one of her films. In fact, she explains that in *Al-khoroug lel-nahar/Coming*

Forth by Day (2012) she paid 6,000 Egyptian pounds for the rights of one of Umm Kulthum's songs. In 2018, she wanted the license for the same song, but the Egyptian government-owned multimedia company *Sawt al-Qahira* (Sono Cairo) owned its rights. So she was obliged to pay 100,000 Egyptian pounds for less than one minute of music. For Lotfy, this is very disappointing because she believes that having access to her own heritage should be free. In fact, the filmmaker thinks that the Egyptian people should have the rights to Umm Kulthum's songs. She questions who is allowed to enjoy culture in light of constricting copyright laws.

Regarding video-on-demand and streaming platforms, the filmmaker Maggie Morgan acknowledges that they have changed the scene to a small extent because they are starting to buy independent films, shorts, and documentaries. Countering this perspective, Karkouti and Sobky underline the pitfalls of these new platforms, arguing that they do not pay enough to keep the industry afloat. While further discussion of this topic is outside the scope of this article, the opportunities that online streaming platforms present to independent filmmakers are indeed worthy pursuits for further study.

Over the course of our conversation, most of my interlocutors admitted that distributing independent films in Egypt is a constant struggle. While talking with them, I saw a collective willingness to present alternative films to the public and to cultivate a wider and more fervent local reception for these films. According to all my interviewees, independent films impart a form of higher knowledge and consequently they admitted that audiences in these films are required to critically think and to not only feel entertained. That is why some of my interlocutors acknowledged that labelling a film as "art-house" or a "festival film" is often unhelpful and may discourage audience attendance. In fact, quite often audiences are unfamiliar with the alternative film's language, image and narrative style because acquiring this familiarity is a gradual process that requires time and audiences need to be guided through it.

What I also believe is needed here is research and new strategies. As Karkouti from MAD Solutions underlined, the process of distributing an alternative film in Egypt is very much linked to the concept of "trusting" the distributors' "gut" because, given the lack of data and research on this subject, distributors mainly rely on the experience they have gained in the field. Research also means finding new strategies that may be guided by cultural policies, and that distributors can use to accompany and guide audiences. In fact, the critical role of distributors and the present infrastructures of film exhibition and distribution demand further study because there is an imperative need to ask questions about how these films can find audiences and through which channel. This is crucial because avoiding the traditional tropes and melodramatic representations of "the Hollywood film-making style" that overshadow Egyptian cinema means addressing the issue of how cinema can speak to viewers on a more realistic and personal level, create a shared space for social and political engagement and eventually impact society.

I wish to express my gratitude to Hala Lotfy, Alaa Karkouti, Ahmed Sobky, Youssef Shazly, Mariz Kelada, Maggie Morgan and Irit Neidhardt for generously spending their precious time to answer my questions, despite their busy schedules. A huge thank you also goes to Nour El Safoury and Sabine Abi Saber for all the productive suggestions they made and for taking the time to read my article.

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Valentina Villani

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Poetics of Historical Contemplation With Syria and its Diaspora: An Interview with Hala Alabdalla

By Basil Alsubee

Translated from Arabic to English by Basil AlSubee

I met and spoke with Hala Alabdalla, Syrian documentary filmmaker currently based in Paris, regarding her most recent film, *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence* (2021). The film serves as a personal message to one of Hala's oldest friends, the late Omar Amiralay, a pioneering documentary filmmaker and long-time critic of the Syrian regime who passed away a month before the unfolding of the revolutionary moment of 2011.

Taking *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence* as a constantly resurfacing point of departure, Hala Alabdallah and I explore various topics pertaining to cinema and politics within and beyond Syria. By the end of our conversation, we felt a strong kinship in our thinking about the relationship between politics, poetics, and fostering collectivity in times of loss.

The first part of our conversation centers around Hala's relationship to the documentary form, starting with her first film as a director, *I Am the One Who Carries the Flowers to Her Grave* (2006) and moving along to her most recent film, Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence. Hala's documentary films could be distinguished by her insistence on a revelatory honesty. In her own words this insistence cannot be separated from a personal and political choice to reject the common address of state and news documentary cinema, both in Syria and throughout the Arab world. Instead of the more clean and polished form of state and news documentary, Hala's experimental, poetically meditative style finds its artistic and political efficacy in its ability to capture the messiness of social entanglement, of both the subjects of her films and her audiences. Hala finds her freeform aesthetic to be a more honest and forthcoming way to be in community with the audiences of her films, whom she insists on characterizing as participants in her film projects rather than as spectators.

Hala's turn away from state and news documentary aesthetics in the Arab world carries more than a simplistic call for documentarian truth-telling—it comes from a keen awareness about the systemic invisibility created at the hands of the Syrian state, an overwhelming silence briefly overturned in 2011. When thinking about the modern history of images in Syria, Hala does not simply critique the singular portrait of Assad as ruler in Syria, but points to the silences hiding beneath this singular image. These silences make the singular image of the ruler possible to begin with: such as silence around the 1982 massacre in Hala's hometown of Hama, or the realities unfolding in the brutal secrecy of Syrian prisons. If state violence in Syria is then understood as an act of creating invisibility, 2011 becomes significant not simply as a moment of uprising, but also as a moment of de-invisibilizing.

After a brief discussion of this history, the second section of our conversation is grounded in the political present, over a decade removed from 2011 and in a time when most Syrians find themselves reckoning with the immensity of loss. For both Hala and me, making sense of our political present and intervening in it seems impossible without an intergenerational process of historical contemplation and engagement with memory. As a result, throughout our conversation we find ourselves returning to the massive collection of sound and image fragments from before and after 2011 which would have remained largely inaccessible if not for that revolutionary moment.

From there, the third section of our conversation offers a historical and autobiographical deep dive into Hala's relationships with political organizing and ciné clubs. We speak a bit about Hala's relationship with Omar Amiralay as well as her involvements with the Damascus Ciné Club and the Marxist Labor Party in 1970s Syria. Hala directly traces her choice to pursue filmmaking back to the ethos of collective organizing she developed in both of these spaces. By rooting her own artistic trajectory in her participation in both the Marxist Labor Party and the Damascus Ciné Club, she emphasizes the importance of nurturing collectivity in all of her film projects.

It is particularly poignant to think about Hala's ethos of collectivity today in light of the vastness of the Syrian diaspora—the subject of the fourth and final part of our conversation. Here, Hala speaks about her earliest days after migrating to Paris, working in cinema between Syria and France, and how she became particularly drawn to poetry as a means of "building bridges between souls." Our conversation comes full circle as Hala speaks about the political and social necessity of intergenerational exchange within the large Syrian diaspora, and the role she sees for poetry in that exchange.

Over the course of our conversation about *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence*, Hala Alabdallah and I pivot around a recurring question: how can cinema create a collective space for political and social engagement in a time of loss over a decade removed from 2011? Thanks to Hala's own cinematic efforts and her ability to generate a revelatory poetics, viewers are able to meditate on that question as they revisit the rare intimate scenes she filmed with her late friend and colleague Omar Amiralay. Today, Amiralay's work and life trajectory remain deeply compelling for many generations throughout the Arab world who view his documentary cinema in a new light, especially in the wake of 2011. In turn, Hala Alabdallah's poetic documentary form provides us with openings that allow us to be collectively present with Omar Amiralay, as well as with history, memory, and pain, in spite of incomprehensibly distant geographies.

Hala Alabdalla's first film, *I Am the One Who Carries the Flowers to Her Grave*, is available online, and you can watch it through this link.

Section I: Resistance and Revelatory Honesty in Hala Alabdallah's Documentary Form

BA: Yesterday, while speaking with some friends about your first film *I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave* (2006), we brought up the amount of off-screen labor that created the possibility for producing the film to begin with. The film could not be possible, for example, without intimate relationships, the insights of age, and your own personal life trajectory with all the hope and despair that it contains. The result is a deeply personal film that you have since described as "a piece of your soul." Your latest film, *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence* (2021), is not very different in that sense—it's as personal to you as it is unquestionably political. *Omar Amiralay* positions the spectator as an intruder into an intimate meeting between lifelong friends in a strange space between life and death. In doing so, the film relies on an active narration addressing the audience and including them into the intimate scene. Is there a reason why you felt it was necessary to produce a film that created public memory of a dialogue between you, Omar, and an audience? Who did you imagine to be the audience for such a film?

HA: Before speaking about *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence*, I want to start first with some general comments on *I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave* because I want to underline an important aspect of your comment. When most people watch personal documentary films that feel closer to everyday life, they assume that we simply and haphazardly cut together clips and photos from our everyday lives and called it a day. This is a consequence of visual culture in our region—when I teach cinema to young people today, I usually have to emphasize the importance of challenging the way they view documentary cinema. This is because documentary cinema has largely been taken over by state propaganda and news channels that keep our relationship with documentary cinema in the region

in a state of underdevelopment. As a result, large numbers of documentary films in our region are unjustly neglected in my view, even among audiences who consider themselves more invested in cinema. In the past ten years however, because of the uprisings throughout the Arab world, many changes have occurred in how audiences relate to documentary images.

I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave is a film that took many long years of labor, years that I enjoyed tremendously and look back on very fondly. It still gives me great joy to hear of people watching the film today. In fact, I consider the film to be a personal metric which I use to gauge how adventurous I can get as a filmmaker with every new project. At the same time, as I begin all my future adventures, I remain aware that an audience will receive the film as an end product, which brings us to the question of the spectator. When I think of the question of the spectator, I actually immediately turn to the Syrian spectator who has been condemned to a regime of censorship. Why do I turn specifically to censorship? Because in our context in Syria, the National Film Organization sponsors films to be created only to be then left on dusty shelves and never seen by anyone. The idea of a film being made and never seen causes me a lot of pain and anger because I think the exhibition of a film—allowing for communication with an audience—is just as crucial as any component of creating a film. I know that these days the viewer is able to find all kinds of films in the world in spite of all censorship, but for me a beautiful dream remains: that I could exhibit my films in Syria and move across cities and villages to hear people's reactions and to start discussions with them and learn from them. Do I not have the right to this simple dream?

My views on exhibition and spectatorship were actually among my main differences with Omar, who cared more about creating new films irrespective of whether or not a viewer could engage immediately with the film. In fact, Omar did not take initiative to send his films to film festivals or private screenings after they were initially screened on French television channels. He was simply not too concerned with this part of a film's life, and its ongoing relationship with a spectator. I would consider myself to hold the opposite view. While I don't actively imagine an audience member

over my shoulder dictating all the decisions I make as a filmmaker, I still have a deep desire to be transparent and honest with my audience, and to build bridges and weave threads with the viewer through my films, and ask the viewer to cross the bridge or pull the thread in my direction. In fact, I would consider the audience member to be a friendly collaborator in creating the film. If they accept the invitation to collaborate, it would be of benefit to the film, and if they don't accept it, then that's their prerogative.

BA: I am interested in this aesthetics of revelatory honesty that appears in your films. For example, both *I Am the One Who Carries the Flowers to Her Grave* and *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence* rely on footage that is typically left out of the final editing stage of most major films—in fact we could say that perhaps 75% of those films consist of footage of you changing the microphone and camera setups, for example, or of you receiving mocking remarks from the friends you are interviewing. This brings me to the question of the documentary genre of filmmaking, which you have long been engaged with, in ways that are similar and different from Omar's engagement with documentary. What brought you to documentary as a style of filmmaking to begin with?

HA: I came to documentary from the world of politics, so documentary films for me have always been attached to the question of resistance, be it resistance against pain or fear or oppression. So my engagement with documentary cinema became a means of exploring how human beings can express their pain and anxiety. At the same time, by engaging with our pains through the process of filmmaking, we start a process of invigorating ourselves through communicating with ourselves and with others.

In the beginning of my engagement with documentary cinema this was much more important to me than art for its own sake, which is a stance that also cannot be separated from my own political upbringing as a child. Back then, I believed firmly, in a simplistic way perhaps, that having some kind of political commitment was an obligation of mine. This belief then took me to political organizations that were concerned with solidarity efforts and work in service of change, which were the same motivations that took

me to cinema to begin with, rather than a desire for fame or hopes of becoming a star who can exert control over others via the camera. I never held these ambitions, and still don't, because even today filmmaking feels to me like a responsibility.

At the same time, in the spirit of my youthful rebellion, I was very interested in breaking all boundaries in any work I do, and considered it important to destroy any frames or molds in documentary cinema. So instead of simply entering into a set mold for documentary cinema, I considered documentary to be my personal playground in which I can experiment, allowing the work to take me wherever it needs to take me without any limits or conditions. After I finished working on *I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave*, I felt that the films I wanted to make had accumulated inside of me with the accumulation of all my pains. So when people ask me why my films always make them cry, I say that I wish I could make a film about the sky and flowers and weddings, but as long as the conditions in our country are as they are, I feel that there are screams hiding within my insides, desperate to be released through the filmmaking process.

BA: So creating films from a place of pain and sorrow is connected to resistance through filmmaking, which you also connect to the genre of documentary. But why strictly documentary? Do you think that documentary is inexplicably attached to political resistance in a way that a fictional film is not?

HA: Of course not, I have worked in the past on many fictional films such as Ossama Mohammad's *Stars in Broad Daylight* and *Box of Life*, and Mohammad Malas's The Night, as well as many other French films. There are many different, important and necessary ways of creating resistant films, in the deepest sense of the word "resistance."

But for me personally, one of the important conditions that I consider a priority in my filmmaking is refusing to be tethered closely to any political or economic system or funding from any particular organization that could dictate the limits of my work. This is much easier to do when you are working with documentary rather than most genres of fiction films. I could express myself on a range of different issues with my own personal means which is exactly

what I did with *I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave* without the presence of a production team or actors that I would have otherwise needed to pay living wages. (Of course, I also enjoyed the collaboration and support of the director Ammar Beik in various stages of making the film.)

While we are on the subject, despite the fact that I cannot fully reject the category of "documentary" for my films, I prefer personally to think of them instead as "free films." None of my films follow the expected logics of documentary films, and the process of making them does not fit any predetermined criteria for documentary either. My creative process depends heavily on writing and experimenting with the filming process—it is only afterwards in the editing stage that I realize that the footage carries material that could be retroactively labeled as documentary. But the original conception of the films typically comes from a place of fiction—even *Omar Amiralay* takes the audience on an almost fictional trajectory. As a result, for me, the most important component of my films is freedom in writing and creating and revealing to the viewer, and this freedom for me is a more important descriptor for my work than that of documentary. But the price of this freedom is a feeling of isolation that is a result of attempting to create something commercially undesirable and that does not look much like most of the other films that are out there.

Section II: Silencing and Making Visible, "The Image" in Syria

BA: I want to stay a little bit with the relationship you've drawn between resistance and cinema but I will return later to what you have coined here as the "free film." You spoke in the past, and many others did as well, about the role played by images and filmmaking in service of resistance inside Syria, especially after the beginning of the revolution, and before it as well. Do you think that this political moment we are living, the moment in which *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence* is being screened, 11 years after the beginning of the revolution and after the displacement of more than half of Syria's population, is a new political moment that demands a new role for cinema in service of resistance?

HA: Absolutely! The role of the arts vis-a-vis politics changes with the passing of every moment and every minute. If you ask me personally, at this exact moment of defeat, darkness, and shrinking horizons, I would say that poetry is the artistic language that affects me the most. I get a tremendous amount of pleasure from reading a good poem—it almost feels like a massage to my soul.

Yet I can also say without a doubt, and after having lived a long life, that cinema has proven that it holds a boundless amount of energy and power. What I mean by this statement is that cinema has and always will have a role to play at any given moment we are living in. In this moment in which we find ourselves broken and in a state of catastrophe, after having lost countless people to bombings, killings, and imprisonment, after having lost entire villages and parts of cities, and after all the massive energies and endless sacrifices that have been given to the revolution… In this moment of extreme tragedy that Syrians are living in, it only makes sense that we ask whether or not cinema has a role to play in times of suffocating darkness. Today, I

personally find myself holding onto my faith in cinema. In my opinion, cinema has a crucial role, just as any of the other art forms.

That role certainly looks different from the kind of cinema that young Syrian organizers produced in 2011. Back then, they risked their lives and faced death to film what was happening in front of them in the immediate moment. At that moment, I called these films documentary auteur films because that moment demanded immediate recording from the perspectives of people living in grave danger, regardless of the immense personal costs of such kind of filmmaking. There was an exceptional urgency to film exactly what was happening in that moment in time and to communicate it on a mass scale. As a result, this cinema looks nothing like what we work on today, ten years later. That older, more urgent cinema transforms today into documents that can support us in creating contemporary cinema, nourishing our inquiries regardless of their form.

For me personally today is a moment that demands deep contemplation, meditation, searching, questioning, and pulling apart the past, whether that be the history of our country before 2011 or of the early days of the revolution or of the changes that unfolded afterwards. This history makes it imperative to ask new kinds of questions which lead to a very different kind of cinema with a wider horizon of possible ends. There is a much wider spectrum of choices available to Syrian filmmakers to contend with starting from the original conception of their film projects through the projects' execution: the selection of equipment, curation of an intended audience, searching for appropriate means for funding and distribution, and ultimately, the form and content of the film. This broader array of choices creates new possibilities for contemporary cinema.

To return to your original question about the role of cinema today: cinema helps us understand what we are living in today. It helps us search for truth, prompt complex questions for discussion, and hold onto threads for our salvation. It also helps us shed light on what the regime attempts to erase and invisibilize. But more than anything, cinema ensures that we do not collapse and surrender to a suffocating sense of impossibility—that our conditions will never change. This is my own

interpretation on how resistance through cinema effectively works: I resist weakness and doom by searching for the material of my next film, which rebuilds my backbone and keeps me standing.

At the same time, there is another strand of resistance cinema that prioritizes working through memory, as well as studying historical conditions with greater distance and objectivity. These different ways of dealing with our reality represent cinema's vast margin where we can go wherever makes us feel that we can create something positive.

I'll return a bit to my own personal experience and my relationship with documentary cinema today. I spent quite some time between 1985 and 2005 working largely as a collaborator on both documentary and fiction films, and then afterwards, I redirected my attention towards my own voice as a filmmaker. When I did so, I came up with this strange revelatory and free cinema, which takes my personal struggles as a point of departure to reach collective struggle, and by doing so, moving between poetics and realism. So between 2005 and 2020, I made my films within these parameters: honesty, struggle, and resistance against all that might be enforced, simplistic, and expected.

Today as 2023 begins, I find that I no longer have the authority to make documentary films about Syria because the distance between me and Syria has simply become too heavy. I have no real existential or material links with what's happening inside of Syria. In fact, I feel that this vast distance between myself and what the people of our country have to live everyday has forced me to hit the brakes on what I could allow myself to say about Syria in my films.

Today, I cannot look anyone who lives in Syria in the eye out of shame, and I cannot speak about, analyze, or make judgments about what they are living through. For example, I refuse to reproach people who are living today under the Syrian regime and describe them as people who are regime collaborators, as some do. On the contrary, I believe most of the people who remain in Syria today are people who are resisting the conditions of oppression in their own particular ways, and I respect them deeply. I am ashamed to speak about them while I am living in a house in which I have electricity and water, while I have the bare minimum of my daily needs met

without having to live under the daily fear of imprisonment or of being subjected to violence on the streets. Because of my distance from these conditions of life, I have decided to search for a different method of expression other than the documentary form, and so I have written a fictional screenplay for a short film that I am working on today which speaks to my emotions without making any claims on what is happening in Syria.

BA: I'd like to comment a bit on what you've mentioned about the importance of engaging with history when thinking about the role of cinema in our present moment. I resonate with a lot of what you said. I find myself flung within the large Syrian diaspora, and among a generation that has witnessed the Syrian revolution from a distance at a very young age. While we were kids, many of us discovered the emotions you described, namely the shame towards the people of our homeland, and these emotions still chase us to this day. Yet at the same time ever since our youth, we have felt that we were somehow a part of what happened in our country, and the events of our homeland took on a very large part of our emotional capacity. But if I want to focus more on how I personally engage with this question today, I would say that I am, as many of my generational peers, primarily invested in questions surrounding archives, history, and memory, and it was precisely that investment that brought me to your films and to Syrian cinema more broadly in the first place. For me, cinema has been one of the many ways I have put a concerted effort into becoming more familiar with the history of my country and what unfolded in it before I was born or in my childhood years. I spend a tremendous amount of effort looking into every detail in every archive in search of an answer to the question of "what is it that brought us to the moment in which we live?" It may be a simple and romantic notion, or it may be altogether misguided, but I am convinced that when I engage with the past in hopes of understanding the present in which I live, I may be more effective in playing a modest role in transforming the present into a future that is different from what we live today. This is the impulse behind my obsession with these archives of memories that are captured in

sound and image and which we call cinema. And this cinema, including and especially yours, gives me a new language to understand and reckon with my present.

HA: I agree with what you've mentioned regarding your generation. Unfortunately, there is a lack of knowledge among your generation and the generation a bit older than yours about our country's history before 2011. Most of them assume that the Syrian Revolution was the first organized opposition to the regime due to the absence of archives, since there is not much that young people can materially hold in their hands to let them know about the past. This is amplified by the fact that organized opposition movements had to remain secretive and did not produce many material archives like newspapers or films—even more so when it came to talking about our political detainees, whose circumstances were shrouded by complete absence. These silences and archival gaps invite projects for revisiting the past, assembling archives, and exchanging intergenerational knowledge. I find this kind of work deeply important in this political moment. In fact, this is a big part of why I agreed to do this interview with you, despite not knowing each other previously, the vast distance between where each of us lives, and our different primary languages of communication.

I would like to add one extra note in addition to what you've said, which is on some of the differences between your generation's relationship with the word "image," and ours. The image has a very different kind of presence in our lives—for example the singular image that you find plastered as a portrait of the leader all over the Damascus Airport upon your arrival. We are so used to this image, it might as well be the white noise of any built space. As a result, I never noticed just how bizarre this singular image was until I was around a young person who was unfamiliar with our context and got shocked by the phenomenon, which I would describe as a form of visual occupation.

More importantly, that singular image was completely ripped apart in 2011, a year we could only describe as a rupture in the history

of our country. In fact, I would say that the revolution materialized in the very moment that our youth climbed onto each other's shoulders to rip apart the same singular image that we never even dared to look in the eye. This moment is an extremely important station that we need to pause at and stay with, especially in any conversation about the "image" in our country's context.

Another important aspect of the "image" in our country is the image's absence, especially when it comes to the massacre of Hama. Despite the fact that I was born and raised in Hama, and many of my closest friends and relatives are also from Hama, no one has a single image in their heads for what happened in 1982. It is a completely absent image; there is no archive or visual history for that moment. Similarly, there are many parts of our country which cannot be photographed. The reason why I mention all of this is to emphasize the sheer amount of change that took place in 2011. One of the most significant transformations of that time is our completely new understanding of the sociopolitical role of the image as well as its relevance to our region's history and archives.

SECTION III: Collectivity as Ethos in Syrian Cinema History

BA: Perhaps we can think through the connections between history, archive, and memory through your film on Omar Amiralay. You spoke previously in a televised interview that the footage you had filmed before he passed away was originally supposed to be developed and supplemented in a more professional production if Omar Amiralay had not unexpectedly passed away. Years later, you returned to that original footage you had filmed, and considered finishing the film almost as if you were returning to Omar's last will and testament. That footage became the backbone of your latest film. My question is about how you treated this material after his passing, because at the same moment you express both the deep love you have for him, and point out certain differences between you two. You voice some friendly criticism. Can you elaborate on the differences between you and Omar, and maybe tell me a bit about what you think are the personal experiences that created these differences?

HA: There are a few different points I'd like to unpack in your question. In terms of how I treated the original footage after Omar passed away, I should say that the footage I shot was largely improvisational and reflected a general outline of topics to be delved into more deeply during a later stage of production. I could not have expected that this footage would end up being the final recorded material before Omar passes away. Moreover, contrary to what I had come to expect from Omar over the course of our friendship, he was actually deeply vulnerable in front of the camera, and spoke earnestly about sensitive and surprisingly personal topics. Even those who know Omar really well were surprised by his vulnerability. Because of that, I was actually really concerned with how I would handle the editing stage. It felt like Omar entrusted me with the vulnerability he shared on-camera before his death, and I needed to honor that trust. What made things even more complicated was the tension between my deep desire to be as adventurous as I am normally

during the editing stage and wanting to hold myself accountable to the subject of the film who had already passed away and could not personally critique the film or even reject it altogether. It really was a heavy responsibility.

The second point I want to address is your suggestion that I was reprimanding Omar when I addressed his negligence of the issue of censorship which made his films impossible to view in Syria. I don't deny that I could and did occasionally critique Omar. It's only natural that I would pose the question of censorship as a point of inquiry since I was the film's director and Omar's interviewer. But I would not go so far as to call it reprimanding—in a sense it was an expression of my own admiration for his stubbornness and his refusal to give the censors who tirelessly chased after him any power over him or over the directions of his films.

As for the differences between me and Omar, I don't think our differences were a cause of disagreement between us, as much as they were simply reflections of our different natures. Omar and I used to always honestly address each other and critique one another—he did it playfully and with a smile while I did it with a seriousness Omar used to jokingly call childish. This was the nature of our friendship!

Having said that, I'll speak a bit on how Omar and I approach cinema differently. Omar is a master of his craft and I refuse to compare myself to him, yet this does not mean I can't mention some of the same things I mentioned in the film about how he chooses the topics for his films. When Omar works on a film, it usually comes from a political consciousness that cannot be separated from an intellectual and artistic vanguardism that he has a right to as a master of his craft. On the other hand, I make my films from my heart and my insides, and from an adventurous curiosity.

Let me illustrate this a bit more deeply. In the early 1970s when Omar worked on *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* (1974) with Saadallah Wannous for example, they both felt that they had a high level of knowledge and political consciousness to confidently stick their feet into the mud of the poorest parts of Syria. From the position of an intellectual and artistic Damascene vanguard, and

after having lived and studied in Paris and participated in the student movement of 1968, they arrived in this forgotten village of Syria in order to conduct a deep critical study of the roots of injustice in our country. That approach undoubtedly came from noble and just intentions. On the other hand, my approach tends to be a bit more quietly contemplative: I listen to the subjects of my film with the intention of expressing their struggles as well as my own struggles. Through this approach I would consider myself to be a part of a larger group of artists who are trying to express their emotions through the cinematic medium and to share them with the viewer.

There is another key point of difference between my approach to cinema and Omar's, particularly surrounding the question of honesty and transparency in the filmmaking process. I always thought it was important that the person behind the camera and the person in front of it maintain a forthcoming and honest relationship. Omar and I have discussed this issue countless times on-screen and off-screen and we never came to an agreement. I felt the need to mention it in the film to allow the viewer to understand Omar's point of view, which is that the film director who prioritizes justice and truth can be dishonest to their film subjects if necessary, particularly if these film subjects do not deserve the director's honesty and transparency because of their complicity in violence and injustice.

BA: I'd like to focus on the broader historical moment in which you two met and began to build a relationship, specifically in the early 1970s before you were imprisoned and before you left Syria. As you mentioned previously, part of what makes your entry to cinema unique is that it was through the realm of politics. At the time, there were two significant spaces in which you operated: the Damascus Cine Club where Omar Amiralay was a central organizer, and the Marxist circles in *Rabitat al-Amal Al-Shuyu'i*, a leftist political organization operating in secret. What was it that took you to these two spaces, and how were they similar and different?

HA: If you want me to describe to you how I first came to politics, I would like to say that it cannot be separated from the broader atmosphere at the time in Hama where I was born and lived before my family moved to Damascus when I was still relatively young in the early 1970s. Hama, of course, was particularly known for its opposition to the regime. I lived around my uncles who were part of the Arab Socialist Party which was known for its leaders, names like Akram Hourani, Khalil Kallas and others who had also spent many years in prison for their efforts. The general atmosphere in our household was also a deeply political one because our parents raised us to never bow down, to stand up in dignity, and to refuse to remain silent in the face of injustice. So despite the fact that my parents moved around Syria a lot because of my father's work, we still considered Hama to be our central point of reference.

In Damascus, I was surrounded by young people who were interested in political discussions and who were more animated by the general atmosphere of excitement in our country than by consciousness or knowledge. But my relationships with these friends as a little girl made me feel that it was possible to transform the political situation in our country through collective work and study, and that remaining sedated and accepting of a regime that came to power through a coup d'etat against its own party was completely unthinkable. Over time, some friends who were older than me began to support me and took me to secret political organizing meetings, despite my young age. For the record, one of the greatest difficulties we faced at that time was building trust among comrades in secretive organizations, because we all had to prove that we were not informants and that we were all steadfast in our beliefs. Ideally, collective trust gets built through self-development, sacrifice for the sake of others, patience, concealing your political identity as well as your comrades' identities, and sharing your knowledge with others without any form of political posturing. These

might seem like basic qualities but they are actually not really present in most people—they are also all absolutely necessary for secretive political organizing.

My imprisonment, along with other comrades in the late 1970s, was a result of a confession from one of our imprisoned comrades. His feelings of violated personal dignity overcame his solidarity with his comrades—he found it unacceptable to face any violence from state police in order to protect the identity of the organization. So he chose to confess our names and our locations. This example proves that the rigorous political education and training that happens in political organizations and parties does not always manifest well in their members.

BA: This political atmosphere you mention in secretive political organizations… was that same atmosphere present in the Damascus Cine Club?

HA: I'll speak more broadly about the cine club before answering your question. My entry into cinema was based on a kind of rebellion. When I was a child, I had a much bigger relationship with literature than I did with cinema because my family had encouraged a culture of reading Arabic novels and poetry. Back then I remember I used to get very excited to visit my grandfather's house in Hama because of the massive library he had in his house. In what resembles a scene from a novel, our uncle used to stay up late with us and gather us around him while he read poetry and drank a glass of arak. These kinds of activities created a general atmosphere of interest in the arts which eventually brought us to cinema. Cinema was a particularly bold adventure for us because it used to have an almost legendary aura around it in my imagination,

especially prior to the presence of television and the Internet. So when I heard about the Damascus Cine Club, which used to be close to our house in Syria, I was immediately intrigued, not simply by the possibility of watching the films but because of the rumors I heard about what happened after the films ended: these extremely long discussions that sometimes lasted longer than the film screenings themselves. I started attending the cine club and was mesmerized by the topics which touched on local and global political conditions that I was excited to hear and discuss as a teenager.

BA: And both the discussions, as well as the cine club were deeply politicized, no?

HA: Of course they were! That was why I went to the cine club in the first place. Even if I had to miss the entire film screening I felt I absolutely could not miss those discussions because they helped me think deeply about the reality I experienced, as well as the relationship between art and politics more broadly. At the same time, I romantically thought I could find potential comrades to join our organization at the cine club. I thought, "surely the cinema people would have many of the characteristics we look for in political organizers." One of these potential comrades, of course, was Omar Amiralay, who definitely used to throw away the propaganda literature I gave to him. I didn't care, I used to be just really thrilled at the idea that he would take them in the first place.

SECTION IV: Poetics and Politics in Diaspora

BA: After this time in the 70s, when you were embedded in political organizing and in the cine club, you were imprisoned by the regime, then you left for Lebanon, and then to Paris, which is where your journey as a filmmaker really began. First you worked on film sets for Ossama Mohammad's films, Mohammad Malas's films, Omar Amiralay's films, and those of many other Arab and French filmmakers. Then you made your first film, *I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave*. How did exile in Paris steer your voice and priorities as a filmmaker in directions that might be different or similar to filmmakers in Syria?

HA: Firstly, when you use the word "exile," I feel it carries some political dimensions that I want to distance myself from. I don't like to compare myself to many others who left Syria under much worse conditions—to consider myself among them might be an exercise in self-delusion that I would rather avoid. The last time I visited Damascus was for Omar Amiralay's funeral after his shocking and unexpected passing, and prior to that I used to regularly travel to Syria. I would be subjected to boring routine questioning by the authorities but this never deterred me from going back.

Second, I should elaborate on the period between when I first left for Paris and when I made my first film I *Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave* without comparing myself with other generations or with those who stayed in Syria, since we all have our own trajectories, choices, commitments, and ways of dealing with life's circumstances. When I was imprisoned in Syria, my studies in agricultural engineering in Damascus had been interrupted. After I left prison and traveled to Paris, I did not have the financial means to register in film school and accomplish my own dreams. As a result, I relied on my studies in Damascus to study genetic engineering for very little money, then I studied anthropology and decided to study film at the same

relatively inexpensive college, instead of opting for the more expensive film school I dreamed of. I'm grateful to my good friend Shamil Amiralay (who sadly passed away a few years ago in Damascus), who encouraged me to pursue film and took it upon himself to support my training while I was also studying film. Thanks to his help, I was able to work on my first ever film set, which was on *Stars in Broad Daylight* by Ossama Mohammad when I was still a film student in Paris in the mid-1980s. Working on that set taught me the ins and outs of filmmaking—that was when I first realized that I did not want to have any other career except as a filmmaker. I found my passion, my pleasure, and my personal and political struggle through cinema, and thus could never let go of it despite its financial instability and the impossibility of achieving the full extent of our cinematic visions and dreams. And so I began working in a way that is organically tied to the cinema in Syria.

At the same time, after I left prison in Syria, I refused to do any kind of political work outside of Syria. I felt that political work away from Syria was a self-imposed exercise in delusion, since I felt way too far removed from the daily struggles of Syrians in Syria while I was in Paris. That realization sent me into a deep search for how I can actually be materially useful to my country which was part of my journey into cinema. I realized that I could be useful from Paris as a provider of various resources, such as funding, film equipment, even skilled artists and specialists for Syrian filmmakers inside of Syria to collaborate with. So instead of doing political work from outside of Syria, I wanted to participate in the film industry inside of Syria.

Today I can say that politics was my entryway into cinema: it's an ethic of sacrificing for others, supporting them, and providing all my energies in service of broader political and social change. Over time, I started building up experiences in cinematography, editing, writing, casting, and many other varied roles in cinema because I wanted to be a jack of all trades. Training myself in every aspect of filmmaking helped me make sure I can face all

my needs as a director and allowed me to avoid repetition and routine. It provided me with a really deep joy and an ongoing curiosity for self-development, and broadened my knowledge. So the entire ethic of how I handled my role as a filmmaker could undoubtedly be traced back to my history in political organizing in Syria—it was the reason behind why I gave 20 years of my life to work strictly on others' films, from 1985 until 2005 when I started working on my first full-length film (*I Am the One Who Carries the Flowers to Her Grave*) which was first screened in the Venice Film Festival in 2006.

BA: It's important to emphasize that the political reasons behind the work ethic that drove you to dedicate your time to others' films transitioned into your own cinema as well. The documentary films you began working on by the 2000s, which you describe as "free films," are most certainly deeply political films. My reading of why you describe them as "free films" is the importance you put on poetics in your work, whether through the lyrical way you choose to edit your films, direct poetic address in your narration, or in any other facet of your filmmaking that lends itself to poetry. Why do you attach poetry to politics in your films? And did your migration to France play a role in your attraction to poetics as a form of political address?

HA: I'll share some things I actually have not had the chance to speak about with anyone before or even think out loud about, specifically when it comes to my relationship with poetry. To be honest, from time to time, I feel regretful about the fact that I am not primarily a poet because of how deeply I tend to enjoy poetry. I imagine my relationship with cinema is actually just a form of compensation—by making films, I am often

overcompensating for my inability to write a good poem that addresses my lived reality. Two days ago I was thinking about how making films, despite its immense difficulty, is often a much easier task for me than writing a poem, or composing a song or a painting, because cinema can be broken down into several small elements which you can adjust to allow you to express yourself most effectively. So I go to filmmaking as soon as I confront my own inability to write the poem I most deeply want to write. At the same time, I'm very used to expressing myself in a way that relies deeply on feeling, sentiment, and conscience, whether I am expressing myself in a political capacity or in any other capacity. This method of expression manifests in the kind of poetic cinema I make, which makes me feel like the camera is simply another organ of my body. The cinema I create is like a dough that resembles my own self-development: it takes shape as my own self takes shape, through collaborative work with others. Actually, this very conversation we are having is an example of that same process, because thinking with you takes me somewhere entirely new.

So all of my works rely on a collective work that is born out of freedom, with a bit of intentionality and preparation beforehand. I see that as the central nucleus of all my films, no matter how different the topics are. The nucleus is a deep desire for communicating with others, for a revelatory transparency, for breaking all boundaries and traditions, and for calling others to share boldly and transparently and to break whatever molds they find themselves born into. So my deepest joy is whenever I hear that people feel more emboldened to make the films they've always wanted to make, but have never dared make the attempt, after watching one of my films.

BA: I would consider myself among those who learn from your films a new language for bold and transparent expression, which brings me to my final question to you. My question kind of resembles a question Omar Amiralay asks you in one of the scenes in your film when he asks "so why did you, Hala Alabdallah, choose to make a film about me, Omar Amiralay?"

HA: Before you ask your question, I want to say a bit about how some people interpreted my relationship with Omar in the film. Some were quite upset at my supposed audacity in placing myself on the same plain as Omar, the cinematic giant. They feel that my film carries within it an implicit claim that they find arrogant, simply because I spoke about myself in the same film that focuses primarily on Omar. This reaction makes me laugh a bit, and does not prompt me at all towards hesitation or second-guessing the process of making the film, because I treat Omar in the film the same way that I would treat any human subject in my films: with love, respect, curiosity that cannot be reduced to any form of sacrality. If the viewer is bothered by the way I address Omar in the film, this means that I have productively put the audience's assumptions into question. Perhaps the discomfort is rooted in misogyny, because I am a female filmmaker speaking to a male cinematic genius. Or maybe the viewer finds it uncomfortable to see how two different generations can speak to one another, and speak to their lived realities through cinema in different ways.

Obviously I have a great deal of love and admiration for Omar that comes through in both the film and in this interview, but that should not change the fact that I can face him as he was in the same way that he could face me as I was. In fact it is only natural that we should all be on the same equal plain in life without any hierarchies. When I speak to you for example, despite the very big age gap between us, I feel that I am a human being in much the same way that you are, and that we can learn much from each other and arrive somewhere new together in the moment that we meet and think together without any reference to false hierarchies. Perhaps building bridges between souls in this way is exactly what poetry does, in its essence.

BA: I'm a bit taken aback by what you just described about people's reactions to *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence*. I personally was not attracted to the film simply because it was a film about Omar, his life, and his films, despite considering myself among those who care very deeply about all of those things. One of the main reasons I loved the film is your role as a director, as a human being, and as Omar's friend, and how you play all of these roles with the utmost honesty. Because you are honest with yourself, honest with Omar, and honest with your audience, you build bridges between all of us. As a matter of fact, I don't even think that the poetry that comes out in your films would have any potency if it was not rooted in that same honesty. At the end of the day, the film about Omar is not simply a film about Omar but it's a film about your relationship with Omar, our relationship with Omar, our relationship with you…

HA: And also about time, death, life, love…

BA: Exactly, so my final question is an inversion of the same exact question Omar asks you: why did you agree to do an interview with me? And what I really mean by this question is: what is the end-goal behind engaging with different generations from the large Syrian diaspora through your work?

HA: I always tell my cinema students, some of whom I have been working with since 2004, that I dislike when they use the term "teacher" to describe me. This is because I usually feel that I am also learning with them, so much so that I feel like I am dry soil that they are watering. The reciprocity between us is really life-giving for me, it feels like a really important way of dealing with the loss that we have experienced in our country. I feel that the heavy experiences I have endured, experiences that I continue to carry on my shoulders, would be completely paralyzing if not for the joy of discovery and the flexibility that I gain by working across generational divides.

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Basil AlSubee

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On Positionality and Filmmaking: The ‘Me’ in the Story

By Farah Hallaba

Over the past two years, I have been in conversation with Egyptian and Arab filmmakers about the concept of positionality and what it can offer them when used as a creative tool in their filmmaking processes. I conducted fifteen visual anthropology workshops in which we discussed processes of meaning-making, conceptions of truth(s) and power dynamics in storylines.

During the workshops, we unpacked these concepts through discussions where we collectively reflected on the workshop participants' practices in the independent filmmaking industry, on how they come up with their films' stories, and on the dynamics between filmmakers and the characters in their films. I was inspired to continue these dynamic discussions beyond the workshops.

A photo from the Visual Anthropology Workshop, 2022.

When I was first introduced to anthropology, a professor told me that anthropologists are storytellers who explore socio-cultural narratives. In my opinion, it is not only a discipline but also a lens and a set of tools by which one can see, understand and speak of the complexity of the world they are interested in engaging with. Thinking about anthropology as a lens and a depository of tools for engaging with the socio-cultural world makes it a helpful and inviting discipline, not only to anthropologists, but to artists and filmmakers who are also interested in telling narratives about and creating representations of social worlds. Using anthropological tools to tell narratives allows the storyteller to decode the logics of certain socio-cultural

codes and unpack the complexities of social interactions and their meanings (McGranahan 2015). One of the important values of using anthropology's tools, then, is that they allow the storyteller to study mechanisms of meaning-making and existing interpretations of the social world(s) presented in their films. In this regard, one of the valuable tools is the concept of positionality, which refers to how different parts of an individual's identity—constructed through one's social class, education, gender, networks, bodily abilities, or experiences—position the individual within social contexts and hence influence the meanings attributed to surrounding social phenomena. When storytellers reflect on their positionality as part of their process, they acknowledge their social standing within the work they're producing — a necessary step not only in understanding how meaning is attributed and interpreted, but also in creating new socio-cultural narratives and meanings through artforms like cinema.

This essay is part of a longer project. Through the NAAS x Esmat fellowship program, I began to outline an interactive toolkit for filmmakers that introduces relevant tools from anthropology, such as the concept of positionality, in order to invite a wider conversation among young independent filmmakers around topics such as social standing, power dynamics, sensory ethnography, contextual meaning-making and multilayered truths. The toolkit is meant to be relevant for directors, writers, producers, editors, distributors and programmers. It is also designed to be interactive as I believe that efforts to understand our social world and engage with it, so as to reproduce, rewire or critique it, require both individual and collective labor. Positionality, a primary tool in the toolkit, allows us to have a sense of self awareness, avoid judgements and prioritize engaging with others in the process of developing situational understandings of social experiences. The interactive toolkit, meant to be a vehicle for knowledge production, does not assume a hierarchy of knowledge. It offers space for the multiple vantage points, experiences and roles that make up the process of filmmaking to coexist, as well as for those who are merely interested in engaging with the toolkit to contribute to the discussion. In this essay, I will focus on positionality as a concept and practice and its relationship

to narrative in filmmaking. It is the main conceptual tool in the toolkit, which I hope will offer an opportunity to think of positionality as something dynamic, fluid and transient that one can come to terms with through ongoing reflection and conversation with others.

Being aware of one's social and cultural standing as a filmmaker and storyteller not only reshapes the story being told but creates it. Narrative helps us "translate knowing into telling" (McGranahan 2015).[1] In this translation process, being aware of one's positionality and how dynamic it is influences the technical and creative approach to the 'telling.' It is this process, of translating knowing into telling, that I am interested in extending further through a set of examples and exercises that will be included in the toolkit and briefly presented throughout this essay. Awareness about our social and cultural standing is a process in which we train ourselves to do, be and have certain qualities in our art or research practices.

When filmmakers acknowledge their positionality, it allows them to identify their individual privileges and positions within complex power dynamics and hence narrate stories that are nuanced in their interpretations and presentations of social worlds.

A classic example of a film in which the filmmaker is aware of her social position is Tahani Rached's El Banat Dol, or Those Girls (2006). The success and popularity of this film, I would like to argue, emanates from Tahani's awareness of her position vis-à-vis the girls she films. This film could have become one in which a privileged Egyptian-Canadian filmmaker imposes her views on a group of underprivileged girls who don't share her value systems, but instead, Rached spent a considerable amount of time with them before she started filming to understand and interpret the meanings they hold of the world and their values. The time Rached spent with them can be compared to an ethnographic practice known as participant observation — a process in which anthropologists spend long periods of time doing fieldwork to explain, understand and interpret social worlds.

1 The author of this article also published a book in 2020 titled "Writing Anthropology, Essays on Craft and Commitment." One chapter, titled "Anthropology as Theoretical Storytelling," elaborates more on the article.

Another example I find relevant here is the Palestinian ethno-fiction film *Ghost Hunting* (Raed Antoni, 2017), in which Antoni shares his coming to terms with his privilege and authority over the characters he directs and his vulnerability as someone who is haunted by a personal experience in Israeli prisons. As we watch the film, we, the audience, are offered information that allows us to realize and engage with the complex power dynamics within this film. We may be left with questions around ethics as we watch as well, but the ethno-fiction or docu-drama nature of this personal and collective film helps layer and sophisticate these questions. As an audience, we are forced to reckon with our own social and cultural standing as well while viewing the film. No one is only privileged or only marginalized. It is important to keep an eye on this nuance.

A scene from Ghost Hunting (Raed Antoni, 2017).

These examples show how two filmmakers have employed the concept of positionality as a creative tool in their work, sparking productive conversations about what this tool can bring to the filmmaking process. They also show how acknowledging one's positionality within the world of the story is a dynamic and multilayered process. This is particularly important in avoiding a performed approach to positionality, one that sociologist Louise Folkes calls "shopping list positionality" (2022). Shopping list positionality reduces positionality to a list of identity descriptors that function to indicate the similarities and differences between the filmmaker and the research participants or characters in the film, neglecting the negotiable everyday

aspects of one's positionality. Alternatively, situational understandings of positionality, like those shown in Rached and Antoni's work, depend on filmmakers reflexively engaging with their social surroundings. This could be achieved by engaging with the everyday and the mundane in any particular social context. In my opinion, the mundane is where the majority of social meanings are manifested and contested. Filmmakers who train themselves to appreciate and give weight to everydayness close the divide between what is deemed significant (or exotic) and insignificant. By not elevating one over the other, the ordinary and the extraordinary, one is able to narrate a contextual story that steers clear from fetishization. This influences not only the plot choices but even small details like clothes and shooting locations. Closely examining the everyday interactions and details of the social world a film depicts is the main drive behind the process of acknowledging that one's position as a filmmaker and storyteller is dynamic and contextual.

A scene from Ahlam Momkena/ Permissible Dreams (1983).

A viewer may infer in the documentary *Ahlam Momkena, or Permissible Dreams* (1982), for example, that the filmmaker Atteyat El Abnoudy had many "kitchen table" talks with her film's main character Umm Said. Social geographers Ellen Kohl and Priscilla McCutcheon (2014) name a process of thinking "kitchen table reflexivity," which refers to informal talks and interactions that researchers or filmmakers have with their film crew, community and research subjects or film protagonists. The process is meant to aid in understanding who each person is in specific social contexts and the position they occupy within the matrix of social and cultural networks that make up the larger context of a film or research. As an attitude, kitchen table reflexivity stands in contrast to the reductiveness of shopping list positionality. Kitchen table talks necessitate that filmmakers spend time in the communities they wish to film or creatively depict on screen. In one scene, Abnoudy is in a rural woman's house, and a visitor passes by but is hesitant to enter. Umm Said, the film's main character, tells the visitor "come in, come in, these are our relatives." The scene is no longer than a minute, but functions to signify the amount of time Atteyat and her all-men crew spent with Umm Said. These moments, when kitchen table reflexivity takes place, are when filmmakers negotiate seen and unseen aspects of their positionality, such as social capital, interests and familial background, through informal discussions and participant observation in order to connect with the story and the characters in it. *Ahlam Momkena* is another example that adds to the discussion around positionality and shows that being cognizant of the ways one's position(s) influences the storyline is an ongoing process. Even though this intentional kitchen table time allows filmmakers to become more familiar with the social contexts they enter and their own positions within them, it is still worth noting that no one can ever completely become an insider through this process.

Reflexivity can also be triggered not only by verbal and intellectual interactions but also through the senses and body. Sensory inputs, such as smells and sounds, can help us center embodiment as we try to understand social experiences. The cultures and social worlds we are part of are not only a set of ideas we share, but a range of meanings we attach to our sensory worlds as well. In its handling of sensory details, the Egyptian film *Geld Hayy*, or *Living Skin* (Ahmed Fawzi Saleh, 2010), offers an example of a film that translates the multi-sensorial textures which constitute the characters' world beyond its narrative. The film takes place in *El Madabegh*, where animal skin gets manufactured and a "particular" smell pervades the streets. One of the film's characters explains how he realizes that he is no longer in his neighborhood when the air starts smelling "cleaner." The filmmaker, Ahmed Fawzi Saleh, who spent a lot of time prior to and during the film's production in the area,[2] did not overlook this detail.

It deeply impacted his understanding of how the characters make sense of themselves and others through sensory means. The film hence creates through sound and image a tactile experience for the viewer, engaging the full sensorium and activating sensory memories that could almost invoke *El Madabegh*'s smell. Another example is the iconic film *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Verena Paravel, 2012), produced by the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab. The film explores and "records material life from an optical reality that is not strictly centered on human form" (Escobar 2017). The film is about fatal mass fishing and exploitative labor and most of its scenes are not shot from a human's perspective. This aesthetic choice by the anthropologist-filmmakers who have made *Leviathan* allows them to give justice to the everyday bodily and sensory experiences of the main characters: the fishermen and the fish. As you watch, you can almost smell the sea, fish, blood and even feel sea-sick. This bodily-material experience forms the core of the characters' everyday life. To narrate their social existence, I would like to argue, one can not transfer their hardships and exploitation to an audience without translating their

2 As per conversations with people who closely worked with Ahmed Fawzy Saleh.

sensory world. We do not hear any of the fishermen speak, but engaging with the sensory and bodily textures of their world offers another way to engage with both our and their position in the world, especially their relationship to the non-human creatures in the film.

Beside the conversations that these examples invite and which the toolkit will guide (in ways that are still being formulated), I am also considering including exercises. In one exercise, filmmakers will be asked to record their daily soundscapes, which could then be shared with the group so that participants could guess where and when the sounds were captured. While listening to the recordings, it will hopefully be possible to realize all that goes unheard when we are inside social situations. We train ourselves to mute certain sounds in order to go about our days. However, upon re-visiting these recordings, we become aware of the presence of these sounds. This exercise can help us realize the importance of soundscapes in creating a temporal and spatial ambiance, encouraging filmmakers to use their full sensorium to experience the worlds of their films and ultimately create a more engaging experience for their audiences. The exercise also offers a way to focus on the everyday sensory worlds we inhabit, sparking discussions that could potentially allow participants to realize, through sounds, how they negotiate their relationship with their surroundings and others. By noticing these relationships, participating filmmakers may become more aware of their position as social subjects in the world.

In filmmaking, the practice of *moaaysha*, or cohabitation, can reveal to filmmakers how their social and cultural positions shape the meanings of the worlds they create, what they know, want to tell and understand. Another way to describe what the previously mentioned films do is “thick description,” a concept coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz to describe the transformative potential of realizing that realism does not depend on *tasweer*, or depiction, but on *moaaysha*.

Here is how anthropologist Carole McGranahan describes Geertz's introduction of thick description in her essay "Anthropology as Theoretical Storytelling:"

> When Clifford Geertz, for example, suggests that it's turtles all the way down, this is commentary on the simultaneously bounded and limitless aspects of ethnographic interpretation. To say our descriptions are thick is to say they are concerned with meaning and not only description. We don't just work to describe turtles, but to get at why turtles matter, why it's turtles rather than elephants, and why the fact that it's turtles all the way down does not close down our interpretations, but rather provides a foundation for them. Describing turtles, including why turtles are culturally meaningful, is a key component of theoretical storytelling. Description itself may be a non-narrative form of prose, but thick description is narrative. It involves characters, a plot, a storyline, a form, a goal. In thinking about the place of interpretation within anthropology today, it has in some ways been folded almost seamlessly into ethnography. Interpretation is now unmarked, assumed, expected, and is often narrative in form (McGranahan 2015).

Thick description is a narration of all that filmmakers actively observe and talk about during everyday interactions in their own, and their film's, world. Through thick descriptions, meanings become multilayered and their interpretation a process of negotiation between the audience and what they experience via the screen. It becomes possible as well for multiple interpretations of a single phenomenon to coexist. Although the relevance of thick description is more obvious for documentary filmmaking, this concept can be instrumental to fiction filmmaking as well. Some anthropologists even extend this conversation to science fiction and fantasy worlds. Anthropologists Michael Kilman and Kyra Wellstrom created a toolkit called *Build Better Worlds: Anthropology for Game Designers, Fiction Writers and Filmmakers*, where they introduce

thick description as a tool for sci-fiction and fantasy-based filmmakers to enable them to imagine complex worlds filled with characters and settings free from their own cultural biases and ideas.

Images from “Being Borrowed:On Egyptian Migration to the Gulf,” an exhibition & publication, October 2022. Photos by Ali Zaraay.

Another category of exercises that I hope to develop under the concept of positionality is inspired by a recent experience I had. A screenwriter recently approached me about collaborating on the script for a TV series about an Egyptian family in the Gulf. We met because of my work on *Being Borrowed,* an art/anthropological project that looks at the experiences of Egyptians who migrated to the Gulf. Through a series of workshops, an exhibition, a series of talks and a publication, a group of 25 artists and writers regularly met to unpack representations of Egyptian migration to the Gulf in popular culture and share their own experiences with Gulf migration. My work with the screenwriter makes extensive use of what we uncovered during *Being Borrowed* to build characters and construct their imagined worlds. We discuss the possible meanings these characters may have of class, family, death, loneliness and home. We creatively imagine and design a social world for the characters and simultaneously for the audience’s watching and sharing similar experiences.

I grew up in the Gulf. My parents migrated to Saudi Arabia in 1995, and I lived there from the time I was born in 1996 until the age of 18. I have stakes in the story I am writing. For example, I am particularly interested in class and family dynamics. This interest inevitably influences my creative process and I am more likely to emphasize these dynamics in my characterizations and storylines. The second category of exercises will focus on the act of imagining a character and its social world. I wonder, for example, how the characters and the worlds they inhabit would have differed had the screenwriter approached another anthropologist to work on the script with her. If *moaaysha* is the first step in creating thick descriptions of our socio-cultural worlds, imagination is the second step. It allows us to creatively narrate reality. However, what feeds the imagination (sensorial, emotional, intellectual experiences) is as complex as our social worlds and biases are.

In conclusion, I hope in the coming months to be able to further develop the toolkit and explore more conceptual tools, other than positionality, that could be relevant to young independent filmmakers in my community. I am guided in this process by a belief that reflexive and dynamic understandings of who we are and where we stand in the world as social subjects could take place through film watching. Through the filmmaking and watching processes, we can collectively think and rethink about how our positionality surfs across different social and bodily settings during different stages of our lives. I sensed an urgency to have these conversations in the visual anthropology workshops I conduct. The reason may be that there is pressure on filmmakers today to perform "shopping list positionality," and it also may be because of the complexity of and current shifts in social structures. Whether it is either of these reasons or an entirely different one, I believe that the interactive toolkit can spark collectively productive conversations that may heighten the participants' awareness of their positionalities and give them ways to negotiate its many constituting layers. These conversations can, in turn, offer audiences opportunities to experience more accepting, kinder and less rigid socio-cultural environments in and through films.

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Farah Hallaba

Farah obtained her MA in Social Anthropology and Visual Ethnography from the University of Kent. She started @anthropology_bel3araby انثروبولوجي بالعربي in 2019, aiming to publicize anthropology in an accessible way and in Arabic. She has been doing short engaging online videos and collaborative workshops since then, mainly Visual Anthropology workshops and collaborative Anthropology workshops about social class and migration to the Gulf which led to "Being Borrowed," a multi-media exhibition and publication released in 2022. Farah was a resident teaching fellow at CILAS teaching Ethnographic Studies 2021-2022. She also shares a creative space in downtown Cairo, where she collaborates with artists to offer spaces for creative discussion-based knowledge production.

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قنا: أين تذهب هذا المساء حيث لا مكان؟

بقلم أحمد تاج

على مساحة تقدر بتسعة آلاف كيلومتر مربع، وتعداد سكاني يتخطى الثلاثة ملايين.. لا توجد سينما واحدة في قنا.

في مركز قوص التابع لمحافظة قنا، نشأ أمين الهلالي وحمل شغف تجاه السينما لكنه لم يجد له مكاناً، حيث لا توجد أية قاعات عرض سينمائي في مركز قوص سوى سينما عبد الوهاب، والتي أغلقت أبوابها منذ عشرين عاماً.

أمين: فاكر طشاش إنها (سينما عبد الوهاب) كانت بتعرض أفلام زي «همام في أمستردام» بداية الالفينات وقفلت. أنا مدخلتهاش السينما دي، ملحقتش (..) السينما عندنا كان ليها سمعة سيئة، الناس اللي بتروح السينما زمان كان بيتقال عليهم كلام، إنهم بيحضروا أفلام فيها حاجات خليعة أو بوس أو مخدرات، ده كان المتداول وقتها.

كان هذا الخواء محفزاً لأمين لكي يبدأ مساحة بديلة لعرض وتداول الأفلام في مجتمع محافظ يتعامل مع السينما كمكان لمشاهدة أفلام خليعة، وكانت مبادرة أمين تحديًا من أجل مناهضة ما تمثله السينما للمجتمع المحيط من مساحة غامضة أو منحلة أخلاقيًا. بدأ أمين تجربته في عام ٢٠١٠ بإنشاء جمعية "قوص بلدنا" بغرض إحياء المشهد الثقافي في قوص، وكان ذلك من خلال مساحة قصر الثقافة في قوص.

وفي عام ٢٠١٦ بدأوا في تجربة نادي السينما والتي كانت محاولة بشكلٍ هاوٍ ما لبثت أن تطورت حتى أصبحت مساحة لشراكات مع مهرجانات وورش عمل وجلسات نقدية أهلت فريق عمل النادي لحضور ورش عن برمجة وتسويق الأفلام فيما بعد.

أمين: إحنا على مدار خمس سنين شغالين، النادي تناوب على إدارته ناس كتير ولاد وبنات (..) ده نتج عنه في قوص إن في شباب بدأنا ندعمهم يعملوا أفلام. كل علاقتنا بالأفلام إننا بنتفرج عليها لكن زمان مكانش في حد يعلمنا (...) من خلال نادي السينما استضفنا ناس وعملنا شراكات مع مهرجانات أفلام ومن خلال ده الناس بدأت تيجي تدي ورش (..) عملنا تعاون مع مهرجان الأقصر للسينما الأفريقية وناس من رواد النادي راحوا حضروا ورش، وعملنا تعاون مع مهرجان أفلام الهجرة وناس من الشباب حضروا الورش و أخدنا من أفلامهم (للعرض).

نادي سينما قوص تصوير أيمن الهلالي

لكن، وعلى الرغم من محاولات النادي لخلق زخمًا سينمائيًا في قوص خصوصًا ومحافظة قنا عمومًا، كانت هناك ريبة دائمة من المجتمع المحافظ المحيط تجاه التجربة مما وضع النادي ومنظميه على طريق من الشوك بشكل مستمر، حذر لا ينتهي من ردة الفعل ترتب عليه تحجيم نشاط "نادي سينما قوص".

أمين: ممكن صانع الفيلم ميفكرش في الجمهور، كنت أقابل صناع أفلام عرب وأجانب ونتكلم في مدى ملاءمة الفيلم ده للعرض في مكان زي قوص (..) دايما الناس بره فاكرة إن الجمهور في مصر جمهور واحد، ده غلط، جمهور القاهرة مختلف تمامًا عن جمهور الصعيد. ممكن فيلم ينزل القاهرة الناس تتقبله عادي ولكن في الصعيد لا، الناس متتقبلوش ومتشوفوش وممكن تهاجمه (..) كان مهم إن المخرجين العرب والأجانب يعرفوا إن جمهور مصر مش جمهور واحد ومش جمهور القاهرة فقط.

تبقى الرهبة من المجتمع في سياق "نادي سينما قوص" أحد أهم مقيدات النشاط السينمائي، حيث يستمر اعتقاد الأغلبية بأن السينما مساحة مجهولة وبالتبعية مقلقة وتستلزم رقابة على ما يعرض، الأمر الذي يمكن أن يطرح عدة أسئلة: هل يمكن اعتبار هذا القلق المجتمعي نتيجة عارضة لغياب السينما؟ وهل من الممكن أن تتغير تلك النظرة تجاه السينما إذا ما تواجدت مساحات سينمائية بشكل أكثر في المحيط الثقافي لقنا عمومًا ولقوص خصوصًا؟ وكذلك ما هي الأفلام أو المواضيع التي يمكن أن تسبب "مشكلة" وكيف يمكن أخذ الإطار الثقافي المحلي في الاعتبار عند وضع برامج العروض؟

انتقالًا من فعل المشاهدة إلى الصناعة، تطرق أمين إلى الحلقة الناقصة لكي ينمو مشهد سينمائي في الصعيد به عدد كاف من الصناع لإنتاج أفلام بشكل مستمر، هل ينقصهم المعدات؟ أم التمويل؟ أم شبكة العلاقات؟

أمين: مش هكلمك في ماتيريالز، أنا هكلمك في تعليم وإزاي تنمي فكر، أنا عشت في القاهرة فترة وشفت ناس (من مؤسسة تعليمية دولية) بتعمل أفلام ساذجة جدًا وهما عندهم ماتيريالز رهيبة جدًا وبيستخدموا كاميرات (متطورة) جدًا بس الفيلم لما تتفرج عليه تلاقيه متواضع، لما بفكر بفكر إن مش عاوز ماتيريال أنا عايز أنمي فكر رواد السينما اللي عندي وأديهم ورش عمل في إزاي يقدروا يكتبوا سيناريو كويس ويعملوا منه فيلم، قبل المايكات والكاميرات وكل حاجة. إحنا بنعمل جزء من ده بإننا بنعرض أفلام، مشاهدة أفلام من مدارس مختلفة جزء من تعليم السينما.. أنا بشوف الفيلم بيتعمل إزاي وبيتكون عندي رؤية ووجهة نظر. إحنا بنشتغل بجهود ذاتية، بالعافية جدًا بتقعد تدور فترة عشان تلاقي حد بالكاميرا اللي عايز تشتغل بيها أو بتشتغل باللي معاك. إحنا شغالين على القد، اللي نلاقيه بنشتغل بيه. فاهمني؟

يطرح أمين -بالإضافة إلى غياب البنية التحتية للسينما في الصعيد- غياب البنية التحتية الأساسية مما يجعل محاولات الشغوفين بصناعة الأفلام متأخرة بخطوات كثيرة عن أقرانهم في القاهرة، فيقول أمين:

في ناس بتقولك ممكن أعمل ورش أون لاين، إحنا شوية عندنا الفكر ده مش منتشر. أنا عندي بيوت ناس صحابي معندهمش نت مستقر(..) تلاقي الناس في القاهرة تقولك كل حاجة موجودة ع الانترنت، يا شباب يعني اللي عايز يشتغل بيجتهد ويدور ويعمل، بس إحنا فعلًا في ناس معندهاش خدمات انترنت مستقرة. دي حقيقة.

يضيف أمين أنه بجانب الصعوبات التي يحملها المشهد السينمائي في الصعيد، توجد امتيازات في القاهرة تتعلق بالقدرة على التقديم للمؤسسات المانحة ووفرة الخبرات في الإدارة الثقافية والتي يفتقدها النادي ومجتمع المهتمين بالأفلام في الصعيد عمومًا وفقًا لأمين:

أمين: إحنا مش شاطرين في كتابة المقترحات.

كلنا، كلنا بنهبل يعني. ممكن أبقى شاطر على أرض الواقع لكن مش عارف أقدم عليه (التمويل). وفي ناس شاطرين في التقديم لكن على أرض الواقع مش شاطره. دي حاجات إحنا بنفتقدها. بتوع القاهرة طبعًا شاطرين جدًا في الموضوع ده، يعني مثلًا كنت في ورشة عمل مع (جهة مانحة دولية) كنا ٤ مصريين، ٣

من القاهرة وأنا الوحيد من هنا. هما شغالين، يعني أقعد مع حد يقولي أنا شغال مع (مؤسسة ثقافية دولية) مش عارف بعمل إيه. يعني طب ما إنت أكيد يعني بتاخد خبرات أكتر مني بمراحل وأنا قاعد أصلاً في الصعيد مش عارف حاجة، فاهمني؟ وممكن هما يكونوا أصغر مني سنًا ولكن شاطرين عني عشان اتوفرلهم حاجات متوفرتليش.

تصوير أحمد تاج

إذا، وبما أن كل الطرق تؤدي إلى هناك، ومنها وإليها نعود.. فلما لا نذهب إلى القاهرة؟ يجيب أمين:

أنا دلوقتي عايش ف الصعيد أنا مش عايز أنزل القاهرة أعمل أفلام، القصص والحكايات اللي عايز أحكيها موجودة هنا في المجتمع اللي أنا عايش فيه وده اللي أنا هبقى شاطر فيه. الحياة كمان مختلفة جدًا. العيشة هنا رخيصة، في القاهرة غالية جدًا. غير كده فكرة إن الحياة هنا هدوء وجميلة، القاهرة زحمة جدًا. كمان الطباع، إحنا هنا متعودين على طباع معينة. في القاهرة بنصطدم بناس ولاد هرمة.

من الأسباب الاساسية لأزمة صناعة الأفلام في الصعيد - بحسب أمين- هي مركزية الموارد والامتيازات وحتى البنية الأساسية المستقرة نسبيًا في القاهرة وكذلك مساحات تبادل الخبرات والمعلومات، الأمر الذي يدفع صناع الأفلام في الصعيد إلى سؤال: كيف يمكن كسر هذا التمركز القاهري (والسكندري أيضًا) للسينما المستقلة؟ هل الحل هو خلق تكتلات سينمائية في الصعيد قادرة على تبادل الخبرات؟ أم في إيجاد طرق للتمويل الذاتي؟

عند الحديث عن مستقبل النادي، بدأ أمين في استرجاع أول عرض للنادي في عام ٢٠١٦ والذي كان بمثابة نقطة الانطلاق لرحلة النادي وعرض أمين تصوراته وقتها عن التجربة:

إحنا كنا ١٩ أو ٢٠ سنة وقت أول عرض، عرضنا فيلم Hotel Rwanda وكان فيلم تقيل لكن الحضور كان كتير. وحتى المناقشة بعد الفيلم كانت مناقشة ثرية جدًا. كان عندنا تخوف إننا نطلع ترتيباتنا مش كويسة أو تحصل مشاكل تقنية أثناء العرض، إن اللابتوب مثلاً يفصل خلال الساعتين وخصوصًا إننا ماشيين بمعدات ماشية بالزق، أو حتى إن الناس متحبش التجربة، إن محدش ييجي أو إن الناس تيجي وتشوف الفيلم بايخ فتمشي من النص. كل دي كانت تخوفات. من أسعد اللحظات إني كنت بشوف الناس بتتفرج ومنتبهة للفيلم أو حد يطلع يكلم صاحبه يقوله تعالى الفيلم حلو تعالى. فكنت بتبسط وبحس إننا أهو بدأنا نعمل حاجة مؤثرة. كانت تصوراتنا بسيطة وبدأنا نتعلم بالتجربة والخطأ إزاي نبرمج أفلام وندير النادي ونسوق له مع الناس ومع صناع أفلام ونقاد.

نادي سينما قوص تصوير أيمن الهلالي

كان الدافع وقتها، وفقًا لأمين، هو تطوير مساحة ينمو فيها عدد المهتمين بالأفلام لأنه كان من الصعب وقتها إيجاد دائرة من المهتمين بمشاهدة الأفلام أو صناعتها، فكان الحل الوحيد هو خلق تلك المساحة والتي يمكنها أن تتخطى توفير مجال لممارسة فعل المشاهدة والنقاش إلى دعم الصناعة ودعم الآخرين بشكل تطوعي:

أنا والأصدقاء اللي بدأنا النادي كنا شغوفين بالسينما وعايزين كل الناس يبقوا شغوفين بيها زينا.
ده كان معناه بالنسبالي اني ألاقي ناس هنا، أتكلم مع ناس بتحب الأفلام، نادي السينما خلق المساحة دي. النادي خلق (مجتمع) من المهتمين بالسينما وصناع الأفلام اللي كانوا من رواد النادي. وقت ما بدأنا النادي مكناش نسمع عن صناع أفلام حوالينا لكن النادي ساعد بشكل مباشر وغير مباشر أن يكون حولنا مخرجين بيعملوا أفلام وبيروحوا مهرجانات. ده نجاح لينا ولصحابنا اللي بيعملوا أفلامهم.

تصوير أحمد تاج

ومن تلك النقطة، يطمح أمين لتوسيع عمل النادي بشكل يجعله أكثر احترافية من خلال فهم عملية الإدارة لمساحة سينمائية مستقلة:

حاليًا، بفكر إن فيما بعد يكون في قاعة عرض خاصة بينا بشكل محترف وآخد أفلام من منتجين وموزعين وصناع أفلام وأعرضها. كمان إننا نبقى بندعم صناع الأفلام في المحيط بتاعنا. إحنا بنعمل ده حاليًا بشكل مباشر أو غير مباشر(..) يعني مثلًا حد من صحابنا بيعمل فيلمه فأنا بعرف أمنتج مثلًا فبساعده بشكل تطوعي، حد بيصور فبساعده بشكل تطوعي. إحنا عاملين حاجة زي وحدة إنتاج أفلام ولكن بشكل عفوي. هو تجمع سينمائي من الناس اللي بتحب الموضوع فبنساعد بعض بأفكار أو تنفيذ أو علاقات شخصية. إحنا عاوزين إننا مش كل واحد يشتغل لوحده وإن يكون في حد بيساعدنا إزاي الـ networking ده يكون منظم أكتر وإننا نفهم أكتر عن حاجة زي الإدارة الثقافية مثلًا.. محتاجين نتعلم إزاي نتعامل مع مانحين أو مع المصالح الإدارية أو الحكومية الموجودة وإزاي يبقى عندنا معرفة بالإدارة المالية لمؤسسة ثقافية. دي حاجات ناقصانا في الوقت الحالي محتاجين نعرفها.

أحمد تاج

أحمد تاج، صانع أفلام وفنان بصري ومنتج تأثير (impact producer). مشغول بقضايا حرية التعبير والحوار بين الثقافات ودمقرطة الفن من أجل التغيير الاجتماعي. بدأ اهتمامه بصناعة الأفلام في عام ٢٠١٧، حيث شارك في كتابة وتصوير وإخراج سبعة أفلام قصيرة، شاركت أفلامه في عدد من المهرجانات وحاز على جائزتين عن أفلام "اسكندرية" و "١٤ أغسطس ٢٠١٧: المستقبل".

شخصيات
العدد الخامس
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ملاحظات من وحي مجموعة مقابلات مع مخرجين وعاملين وعاملات بالمجال السينمائي في ليبيا

بقلم فرج السليني

العمل السينمائي في ليبيا: قوانينه وأهم تحدياته

يستعرض هذا المقال تأثير دور الجهات المنظمة للعمل السينمائي في ليبيا، والتي لها اليد العليا في الموافقة على إقامة الأنشطة السينمائية والعروض والمهرجانات، على العمل في القطاع الثقافي والفني وعلى وجهة الخصوص في مجال السينما.

إذ أن أغلب المنظمات والمؤسسات الثقافية تقوم بالتسجيل في مفوضية المجتمع المدني لأن التسجيل لديها يعتبر واضحًا وبسيطًا. حيث يطلب من الراغبين في التسجيل كمنظمات ثقافية أو فنية لدى مفوضية المجتمع المدني تقديم محضر اجتماع تأسيسي، ونموذج يتم تعبئته بالاسم والأهداف والفئات المستهدفة، ونموذج بصفات الأعضاء المؤسسين/ات داخل المنظمة، ونموذج للنظام الإداري الأساسي يمكن تعديله. ورغم أنه نظريًا يفترض أن يضمن التسجيل حق إقامة الأنشطة المكتوبة بالأوراق الرسمية بدون أخذ الموافقات وبما لا يتعارض مع القوانين القضائية بموجب المادة (١٥) من الإعلان الدستوري الليبي لعام ٢٠١١، حيث إن مفوضية المجتمع المدني شخصية اعتبارية ذات ذمة مالية مستقلة وتتبع المجلس الرئاسي الليبي. لكن الواقع يقول بأنه لابد من أخذ الموافقات الأمنية لإقامة المهرجانات والعروض، أحيانًا من المفوضية وأحيانًا من هيئة الخيالة والمسرح والفنون (وهنا الخيالة هو مصطلح السينما في الهيئات العامة الليبية) وهي هيئة دستورية تابعة لمجلس الوزراء تعمل على توفير بيئة لممارسة الفنون من إقامة مسارح ودور عرض إلي توفير دعم للفنانين عن طريق فرص تمويل خاصة وعامة.[1] أحيانًا أخرى يتم طلب الموافقات من البلديات، حيث إن اختصاصات البلدية القانونية والدستورية هي الإشراف والتخطيط والمراقبة على الأعمال الواقعة بنطاق البلدية.

كل هذه الهيئات تفرض القوانين بشكل عشوائي وتتطلب الموافقات ووقت وأموال كثيرة، لذا فكان نتاج غياب السياسات الثقافية المفهمة انكماش العمل الثقافي في ليبيا، الأمر الذي يكون نتاجه مجتمع غير واعي ومائل للعنف إذا افترضنا بأن وجود عمل ثقافي قد يهذب المجتمع ويكسر لديه حاجز الخوف ويحد من العادات والتقاليد السيئة لكونه يهدف لتحليل مشاكل المجتمع والتوعية بها والعمل على حلها على المدى البعيد.

١ خاصة بمعنى الذهاب مباشرة للهيئة وطلب الدعم، وعامة هي التي من المفترض أن يتم نشرها على مواقعهم الرسمية.

تتعدد أسباب ضعف العمل السينمائي في ليبيا، ومن ضمنها عدم وجود دور عرض قائمة، بالرغم من وجود عدد منها مغلق أو تحت سيطرة جهات أمنية للدولة، وقلة مصادر التمويل والمنح للعمل بهذا المجال، وعدم وجود الاستقرار الأمني، والعادات والتقاليد، وغيرها من الأمور التي تطرق لها عدة مخرجين وعاملين وعاملات بالمجال السينمائي في ليبيا من خلال حديثي معهم. ينتمي من تحدثت معهم إلى مدن طرابلس وبنغازي ومصراتة، وهي أكبر ثلاثة مدن في ليبيا، والذين أوضحوا خلال المقابلات التي أجريتها معهم على عملهم ومدى معرفتهم بالقوانين واقتراحاتهم لتطوير القوانين السائدة.

يجب أن يتم التنويه بأن مدينتي مصراتة وطرابلس من الغرب الليبي، وهما تحت سيطرة مفوضية مجتمع مدني وهيئات سينما منفصلة عن الشرق الليبي المتمثلة في هذا المقال بمدينة بنغازي بسبب الانقسام السياسي في الدولة.

لتطوير الملاحظات المعروضة في هذا المقال قابلت عددًا من الشخصيات الفاعلة في المجال السينمائي في ليبيا وهم :

- سامر العامري، ٣٠ سنة، صانع أفلام ومؤسس منظمة ليبيا للأفلام من مدينة طرابلس.
- ميسون صالح، ٤٠ سنة، كاتبة ورئيسة نادي السينما بمنظمة تاناروت للإبداع الليبي من مدينة بنغازي.
- إبراهيم بن سعد، ٣٣ سنة، صانع أفلام وأحد مؤسسي منظمة أركنو للثقافة والفنون من مدينة بنغازي.
- محمد المصلي، ٣٨ سنة، صانع أفلام وأحد أعضاء منظمة ليبيا للأفلام من مدينة مصراتة.
- الحسن بوخريص، ٣٤ سنة، صانع أفلام وطالب ماجستير بكلية الإعلام جامعة بنغازي قسم مسرح وسينما.
- أميمة السنوسي، ٢٣ سنة، صانعة محتوى/مساعدة إخراج وطالبة في قسم السينما بكلية الإعلام جامعة بنغازي.
- وأستعرض فيما يلي أهم العناوين التي تطرقوا لها خلال حديثهم.

١. الحافز للعمل بالمجال السينمائي:

في المقابلات تم الاتفاق على عدة نقاط، حيث قال ابراهيم "السبب اللي خلاني نشتغل في المجال هذا عشان نوصل الأفكار ابتاعي ونأثر بها على الناس"، وأضافت أميمة في هذا السؤال "للفن وسيلة إن تخليك لا شعوريا مكان الفنان أو الشخصية اللي يحكي عليها بحيث لو في السينما تلقى روحك متعاطف ومتأثر مع الشخصيات والأفكار"، وقال الحسن "ليبيا أرض خصبة عشان تشتغل فيها، سوا القصص أو القضايا لكن في تحديات"، وقال سامر " في رغبة لتكسير الصورة النمطية عن ليبيا باستخدام الأفلام، وفي برضو الرغبة عشان نطلعو بليبيا للعالم ومش العكس".

سامر العامري بمهرجان قرطاج السينمائي عام ٢٠٢١

٢. سبب إنشاء منظمات مختصة بالعمل السينمائي:

العامري والمصلي في نفس المنظمة، وقد أوضحا أن "سبب إنشاء المنظمة عشان نعملو كمظلة للمهتمين والمهتمات بالمجال السينمائي، وبرضو عشان نكسروا العادات والتقاليد اللي تحكم بشكل كبير المجتمع الليبي، ومن الأسباب هجرة عدد من صناع الأفلام الليبيين للخارج، الأمر اللي حفزنا ننشؤوا منظمة تحتضن صانعي الأفلام في ظل غياب منظمات مختصة بالسينما وغياب وجود الدولة".

٣. أسباب غياب منظمات عديدة في هذا المجال:

الخوف من الوضع الأمني، لأن بحكم الوضع في ليبيا، فمثل هذه المنظمات والعمل الثقافي يحتاج إلى معارف وعلاقات مع الجهات الأمنية.

عرض الفيلم الليبي السجين والسجّان ضمن نشاط خمسة في خمسة بمدينة بنغازي ٢٠٢١

٤. القوانين الحالية المنظمة للعمل السينمائي:

ممن قابلتهم، لم يكن الكثير على اطلاع بالقوانين المنظمة لهذا المجال، ماعدا العامري والمصلي، حيث قالا عنها بأن "معرفتنا بيها كانت عن طريق القوانين الخاصة بمفوضية المجتمع المدني اللي نتبعولها واللي تعتبر خانقة بكل، عشان يتطلب الأمر إنك تفكر في أدق الأمور وحسبتها ومراجعة الأمن الداخلي خوفًا من أي شيء ممكن إن يعرقلّك العمل، سواء في العرض أو في الأنشطة اللي انديروا فيها"، كل هذه العراقيل على لسانهم تحدد ما هو مسموح وما هو غير مسموح بدون وجود مراجع لهذا الأمر، حيث إن تحديد المسموح من عدمه يعتمد على الموظف في الأمن الداخلي الذي يقوم بإعطائهم التصريحات، مما يصعب العمل، لأنه كما يقول المصلي "مافش فن لو كان مقيّد"، وهذا بالطبع يأتي لعدم وجود مساعدة من هيئة الفنون والخيالة والمسرح في أي إجراء سواء في أخذ تصريحات أو غيره، وقال سامر "السنة اللي فاتت بعد ما درنا مهرجان سبتيموس السينمائي في مدينة طرابلس، أصدرت الهيئة قرارًا عامًا بأنه لا بد من رجوع جميع المنظمات إليها عندما تريد إقامة أية عروض أو مهرجانات سينمائية، مما قيّد العمل بشكل كبير،

فيلم جوجو رابت بنادي السينما بتجمع تاناروت للإبداع الليبي

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حيث إنها مش قاعدة أدير في مهرجانات وتوا تبي تقيّد عمل من عنده الرغبة، ولكن بعد حملات مناصرة ضد هذا القرار تم سحبه".

بالإضافة إلى ذلك انقسمت الهيئة بالمنطقة الغربية إلى جهتين، بسبب بعض الصراعات الداخلية على السلطة، بجانب الانقسام السياسي الذي حدث عندما تم الإعلان عن حكومة الوفاق الوطني بطرابلس عام ٢٠١٥ مما نتج عنه تأسيس حكومة مؤقتة موازية تحكم المنطقة الشرقية من البلاد، ولكل جهة المال والسلطة وقانون تستند إليه في عملها مما جعل العامري والمصلي مضطرين لدعوة الجميع لارضائهم والأمر قد وصل لدفع الرشاوي عندما كانوا يخططون لتدشين مهرجان ستنطلق فعالياته بعد سنة مع جهة تابعة لوزارة الثقافة، حيث طلب الموظف رشوة بمبلغ كبير للاستمرار في الإجراءات. فاضطرا كحل بديل الذهاب إلى البلدية التابعين لها لأخذ الموافقات منها لعرض الافلام في مساحات عمل مشتركة، والبلديات اضطرت إلى أخذ موافقات من مديريات الأمن، الشيء الذي يعتبر غريبًا لأن العروض كانت لأفلام ليبية تتحدث عن أمور إنسانية ومصالحة وطنية ولم تقم بالمساس بأي شيء من عادات وتقاليد المجتمع.

من جانب آخر، يختلف الوضع بالنسبة للعاملين والعاملات بالمنطقة الشرقية. نتيجة الانقسام السياسي، فمفوضية المجتمع المدني وهيئة الفنون والخيالة والمسرح في الشرق لا تتبع للغرب، وإجراءات مفوضية المجتمع أخف في الشرق عن مثيلتها في الغرب، ولكن لا بد أيضًا من أخذ الموافقات الأمنية للعروض خارج مقر المنظمة، وكما قال الحسن "الأمر صعب لو بتشتغل على السينما في ليبيا، سواء لو تبي تنتج أو تعرض"، وتضيف أميمة "من ناحية العروض فالموضوع صعب، لإن مافش حد مهتم، حتى في الكلية، أنا كطالبة نشوف إن مافش ضغط من أساتذة ودكاترة وطلبة وطالبات قسم السينما في الجامعة إنهم يتحركوا، ولا إنّ يتحركوا عشان يغيروا المنهج القديم أو يديروا عروض مستمرة"؛ وأحيانًا أخرى اضطروا لأخذ موافقات حتى للعرض داخل مقار المنظمات، "وعمليًا مافش قوانين واضحة، تخلّينا نشتغلوا بدون توترات ونركزوا إن انديروا عروض سينمائية في بلاد مافيهش دور عرض" كما تقول ميسون صالح، فطال الأمر إلى أن تم مقاضاة منظمة تاناروت بسبب عروض الأفلام بقانون العقوبات الليبي في المادة (٥٠٠) والذي ينص على معاقبة كل من يعرض أشياءً منافية للحياء العام، مما يعيدنا لما قالته على لسانها، "شنو هو الحياء ومن يقدر يقايضنا بيه ويحدده لنّا".

محمد المصلي بالمدينة القديمة في طرابلس ٢٠١٩ أثناء تصور فيلم وثائقي عن المصورات الليبيات

خاتمة وتوصيات

أرى كما يرى كل من تحدثت معهم بأن ليس هناك قوانين واضحة ومنظمة للعمل السينمائي في ليبيا، وأن هناك بعض القرارات الصادرة من هيئة الفنون والخيالة والمسرح المقيدة لعمل المنظمات التي تتبع لمفوضية المجتمع المدني في هذا المجال، مما يجعلنا نتساءل عن إلى من تلجأ المنظمات الثقافية والسينمائية في أخذ الموافقات وغيرها من الأمور التي يتطلبها العمل، هل من الأمن أم من الهيئة أم من مفوضية المجتمع المدني؟

ميسون صالح في جلسة نقاش فيلم جوجو رابت بنادي السينما بتجمع تاناروت للإبداع الليبي

بالرغم من أن التسجيل لدى المفوضية يسمح بإقامة العروض والأنشطة، ويكفل للمنظمة قانونًا إقامة مثل تلك الأنشطة من دون الحاجة لأخذ الموافقات إلا أن الوضع على أرض الواقع منافي لذلك.

عدم دراية صناع وصانعات الأفلام بالقوانين وإن كانت قليلة وغير كافية ومقيدة في تطبيقها، سيكون معرقلًا مستمرًا للعمل، ولن يسمح بالاستمرارية، فمعرفتهم بما لهم وعليهم هو ضرورة من أجل التغيير أو العمل بما هو متاح لضمان سير عجلة العمل السينمائي بالبلاد. نحن بأشد الحاجة لوضع مسودة سياسات ثقافية تنظم العمل الثقافي في ليبيا، وخاصة العمل في المجال السينمائي وعلينا العمل على زيادة وعي صانعات وصناع الأفلام بالقوانين الموجودة وتحفيز حملات مناصرة قد تساهم في تقليل القيود المفروضة على العمل السينمائي في البلاد.

فرج السليني

فرج السليني، ٢٥ سنة، من ليبيا، مدير ثقافي بمنظمة تاناروت للإبداع الليبي وأحد مؤسسي منصة حصة سادسة للفنون. مسؤول عن مركز موارد للمجتمع المدني بمنظمة أكتد الدولية، ومدون عن السينما خاصة فيما يخص دروها كأداة فنية وتوعوية تقوم بنقد المجتمع في محاولة للتغيير وربطها بالمجتمع الليبي. خريج دورة الإدارة الثقافية من معهد جوته الألماني بتونس وبرلين، وخريج ورشة فاعل "تصميم وإدارة المشروعات الثقافية في الظروف الصعبة" وورشة فاعل لتدريب المدربين من مؤسسة العمل للأمل بلبنان؛ مشارك بورش عمل "الريادة في الفنون والثقافة" مع الصندوق العربي للثقافة والفنون آفاق بلبنان؛ باحث بمجال السياسات الثقافية خاصة بما يتعلق بالسينما، حيث شارك بورقته الأولى بعنوان "الليبي في شاشة الآخر" بندوة السياسات الثقافية لمجلة أكسيولوجيا بالجامعة الليبية الدولية.