

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, 'ABOUNADDARA's Take on Images in the Syrian Revolution: A Conversation between Charif Kiwan and Akram Zaatari (Part One)', *Jadaliyya*, July 8, 2014

[The text below is based on a workshop organized by Sonja Mejcher-Atassi at the American University of Beirut, 11 April 2014, with the generous support of the Arts and Humanities Initiative and the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies at AUB and the School of English' project Imagining the Common Ground, University of Kent, UK. Thanks to Loran Peterson and Dona Timani for their help with rendering the text ready for publication
Part One appears below. Part Two will follow soon]

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The name ABOUNADDARA translates as “the man with glasses.” As stated on the collective’s website, www.abounaddara.com, it is a reference to nicknaming people according to their professions and the items associated with them in everyday Arabic culture. It is also a reference to documentary cinema and one of its early pioneers, the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov (1896-1954) who called himself “the man with a movie camera” and inspired a filmmaker collective, the Dziga Vertov Group, in the 1960s, which in ways similar to ABOUNADDARA set out to combine art and political activism.

With its “bullet films,” ranging in length between one and four minutes, ABOUNADDARA does not simply show one side of the revolution-turned-war but gives voice to various camps, rebels as well as supporters of the regime, and first and foremost to ordinary citizens, placing emphasis on their shared humanity. It has posted its films on Facebook via Vimeo every Friday as a way of political participation in the mainly peaceful Friday demonstrations that so marked the Syrian revolution in its early phase, carrying glasses/cameras rather than weapons. Its objective is not to add to the media spectacle of information; rather, it sets out to critically question the very representation of the Syrian revolution and to sensitize its audience to the increasingly desperate situation in Syria.

ABOUNADDARA has gained increasing media coverage itself. A number of its films have been shown at international film festivals, such as Mostra de Venise, Festival du Nouveau Cinéma (Montreal), Doclisboa (Lisbon), the Hand Belfort International Film Festival, and the Human Rights Watch Film Festival (London). The collective was awarded the 2014 Sundance Short Film Grand Jury Prize for “Of God and Dogs.” It has also made one feature film based on its weekly short films, which was broadcast by ARTE TV under the title “Syria: Snapshots of History in the Making.”

Charif Kiwan is a filmmaker and a founding member of ABOUNADDARA.

Akram Zaatari is an artist and a founding member of the Arab Image Foundation.

Q: How can artistic practices and political activism come together in an artistically as well as politically powerful way, without infringing on either one of them? What role have the images of the

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Syrian revolution circulating in mass media played and how can they be critically approached and countered? How can we document, intervene, and take a political position in a conflict that is unfolding in front of our very eyes; how has the political urgency of the situation in Syria impacted ABOUNADDARA? To what extent do artists from Lebanon and Syria share common ground and concerns?

Akram Zaatari: I want to start by asking Charif and myself this question: Why does war often stimulate us to invent new forms, particularly in filmmaking? The history of cinema and the history of war have been kind of intertwined in the twentieth century. WWI, WWII, Vietnam... etc., and in Lebanon, the civil war or wars, presented us filmmakers with anxious times and tough questions. We always felt obliged to position ourselves vis-à-vis that war history. And I would love to hear how Charif perceives this, specifically with a war that is unfolding day after day, changing us and pushing us to position and reposition ourselves facing, not only war, but facing our writing tools, the writing of that history unfolding. One of the things we might share, or maybe not, is a feeling in our generation that we were only capable of talking about the war years when it was announced that war was over – and never while it was unfolding. The experiences that were made while the war was still unfolding were part of war. Although that question (whether we were a part of that war or not), is something that really came later. Do you address this question? Are you part of this war?

Charif Kiwan: I am nobody. I am just a spokesman for a collective of filmmakers. We work under anonymity. And to be more precise, I am also speaking on behalf of my comrades. Akram, thank you for your question; it's a good point to begin with. But I feel uncomfortable with this question because we don't feel we are dealing with a war. We are dealing with a revolution. I don't know what revolution is; I can't explain what it is, but we have the feeling that we are in front of huge breakdowns, ruptures, something very violent and also very beautiful. So, we cannot qualify this. We accept the idea that it is a revolution. Of course, it is turning into war, confrontation, but in our minds, in our eyes, also, we are working to represent this explosion of energy. So we are asking ourselves all the time, what kind of history in the making are we dealing with? So, at least let's say I cannot accept the comparison of this situation, our Syrian situation, with any war. We have to redefine our tools to represent this event. So, of course we are sharing the same preoccupations, but we are very aware that we don't want to clarify this event now.

Zaatari: The event of the revolution...

Kiwan: Yes, the event of the uprising. And it's a very important point because, as we will see, our films are blurring the boundaries between reality and history and the past, the new and the old. We are not trying to capture the tragedy or the confrontation or the current news as it unfolds. We are trying to construct a new image with the tools of cinema.

Zaatari: You've brought up very interesting terms, not only "revolution," but you described it as "beautiful"; violent and beautiful, and that is in itself a beautiful expression that makes me curious. I think that there is a beauty in chaos, sometimes in violence, in the lack of order, in overthrowing order, overthrowing old preconceived ideas, in reinventing oneself, and that happens, truly, in revolutions and maybe less in a war. Sometimes revolutions turn or are turned into wars, and make it difficult to define the line between this and that.

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The idea of “the revolution” was essential in the making of the Lebanese civil wars. The PLO’s implication in the war, as a liberation movement, and the subsequent support it received in Lebanon was grounded in the ideas of leading a “revolution.” To what extent was it achieved? I would question that. We forget that leading a war is leading an economy, but let’s put this aside for a while.

Talking about war and the revolution, I’d like to dedicate my small contribution here to a “beautiful” Syrian filmmaker, Omar Amiralay, who left us a few years ago. Omar did a fantastic film in Souk el Raouche in the eighties while the war in Lebanon was unfolding. It was called *Le Malheur des Uns* (The Misfortune of Some). Part of agreeing to be here, besides my admiration for ABOUNADDARA’s initiative, is an engagement with the ideas that Omar defended back and forth across the Syrian-Lebanese border. Omar’s film gave Lebanon something that Lebanese filmmakers could not yet see because they were too immersed in it. They were busy doing other things, maybe!

First screening:

The Wall (2:36)

Vanguards (1:14)

Everything is under control Mr. President (1:21)

Then what (2:20)

Complot (00:45)

Zaatari: Let’s consider these films as documents that stand on other documents. Just tell us how they are constructed before we ask further questions.

Kiwan: Those films were shot a few months before the revolution began, but we made the films after the revolution began. The idea is, as filmmakers, we have to take the spectator away from the flow of media images by constructing a temporality of its own. We have the right to tell the story in the making with old images, because we are not historians, we are not journalists; we are filmmakers. So, I wanted to start with these films to make sure that you understand me when I speak about the specific approach of the filmmaker.

Zaatari: Naturally one tries to come up with generalizations, trying to find common traits in the films made in the name of one group that is ABOUNADDARA. One looks for common traits but most of the time one fails. Still, there is a flavor, a little bit of which escapes definition, but there is a common thread between them. For example, is this a cynical way of looking at society going through war? All of a sudden ones realizes that one document comes to contradict the tendency. If you try to say, okay, in the construction I try to say that there always seems to be two levels at play; the plastic soldier on the floor, but on the other hand, a soundtrack that is obviously coming from state propaganda, but then I see another document that is not made this way. I just want to learn more. Are there clear common formal concerns? or maybe conventions to follow? I really don’t want to make a comparison with journalism, but let’s say a difference with journalism. What is the difference between this practice and one of an editorial desk? An editorial desk receives either images or films from various sources and defines the criteria of dissemination. I’m sure you have a different relationship to all those documents than an editorial desk, and I would like to know more.

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Kiwan: When the revolution began, we tried to find a way to translate this breakdown or explosion of energy. We wanted to translate this event formally. We wanted to create films like bullets. We wanted to make something beautiful and violent. We wanted to surprise the viewer. Maybe he is looking for information about Syria, or looking for stereotypical images of militants or people. It was our first attempt to build a new format, so the importance of the editing here is huge because the idea here is to mix a present and a past, images from the past and sound from the present.

Zaatari: You gave me a concrete example: images from the past and sounds from the present, so we are facing two different time zones collapsing in one document. Is this a recurring convention, even in what we'll see later?

Kiwan: Yes, because the main idea is if we want to give another image of our society, we have to build a new temporality with our own tools. We cannot accept TV or the media giving the temporality of history. So, the idea is always to collapse things, to let the image tell more than you are seeing. We like the idea of a dialectical image, as expressed by Walter Benjamin, an image that makes possible an encounter between past and present while opening new perspectives. There are two ways to represent reality: One is to say that the image is evidence. I show you the soldier with his weapon shooting and I tell you, as a filmmaker, he's committing a crime; see the evidence, see the proof. The other way is not to use the image to give proof or evidence, but to suggest to and address the viewer not like a judge but like a universal human being who has to ask himself some questions about the present and the past. That's all.

Zaatari: I have to add here that in the whole work presented by ABOUNADDARA there is very, very little violence, if any, so there is a clear choice to put aside all the images that include violence. Right? Do you receive images that include violence and you decide to put them aside?

Kiwan: If you don't mind, I would like to discuss this point at the end.

Zaatari: Charif, please accept my insistence on the same note. When I see work, I often associate my reading of the work with an author. How difficult is it to author a work when you are a collective? Who makes decisions? How does it happen and how does a work that is authored by that collective come to have formal characteristics?

Kiwan: I told you, we want to trouble you. We want you to ask yourself who's making this film. Who are these Syrians who are trying to represent their society? We want to oblige you to recognize that our society can represent itself and give you the feeling that there is something mysterious and you have to go to look for information about this society. When we made this decision, it was actually before the revolution. We wanted the viewer to be in front of very short films that, as I told you, are like bullets, and we wanted [the viewer] to be totally destabilized. That's all I can tell you about this.

Second screening:

The Mother of the Hero (1:27)
The Unknown soldier part three (2:20)
In the name of the father (2:13)
The Islamic State for Dummies part one (3:14)

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Zaatari: So, what we saw is more recent? The works were made in 2012, unlike the first batch.

Kiwan: Yes.

Zaatari: How different are these works? The cynicism is still there. I thought cynicism would disappear as the war got more and more violent, but in that last work there is cynicism that reminds me of Omar Amiralay, trying to subvert the discourse of the powerful by simply giving power the full floor. And Omar always used to say that the vocabulary of the Ba'ath party was about five words, and if you gave them five hours, you would realize how thin the discourse was. So, I see that there are practices that are extending and I don't know if it's the right time to talk about what influences and sources ABOUNADDARA has taken from – from Syrian cinema, or international cinema.

Kiwan: Omar Amiralay is an important source of inspiration for us, especially *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village*, because this film documents reality as well as blurs the boundaries between art and militancy, so it was an important source of inspiration. And I have to say that popular Syrian cinema is very important for us. Let me just tell you a story: When I was a kid, my mother took me to the cinema with my brothers – she used to take us on weekends – and one Friday, she took me to see a Syrian film with popular actors and there, in the darkness, I saw something incredible, something I've never seen before, something very beautiful and very, very violent, just like a revolution – a naked woman. A very beautiful woman, naked. I saw her with her husband and her lover. It was like a transgression. In a public space, I was with my mom, in a traditional society. I'd never even seen my mother naked, and here I was before a beautiful naked woman. It was really the first time I felt freedom physically. You can't imagine – I'd never seen Brigitte Bardot or Marilyn Monroe naked then – it was my first experience.

Zaatari: Do you remember which film?

Kiwan: Of course! *Amut Maratayn Wa Uhibuki*, (*I'd Die Twice and Still Love You*) by Georges Khoury. The actress was Ighra'. So, this is how we discovered cinema in Syria. In the public space of our society, we discovered that transgression was possible. Actually, we are indebted to this generation of filmmakers because they were very modest; they were not politically committed like Omar Amiralay and the generation that came after. But they did great work, because they translate the revolution in very simple language.

Zaatari: So, that brings us again to the differences between the political and militant: militancy being one thing and the political being something else, do you agree?

Kiwan: Yes.

Zaatari: Do you know that Omar's last film [*Omar's Seduction*, 2011, unfinished] had Ighra' in it?

Kiwan: Of course! Maybe he discovered Ighra' like me, when he was a kid, I don't know [laughs].

Third screening:

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The Eagles of Syria (00:49)
Chronicle of a fall foretold (2:12)
Warning (0:38)
Media kill (2:06)
Apocalypse Here (2:28)

Zaatari: Can we talk about the last clip, which positions itself vis-à-vis media not only as an apparatus but also as a system? I'd love to hear your position vis-à-vis media.

Kiwan: In those films we wanted to reconsider the aesthetics of information, so the YouTube imagines the work of these citizen journalists and criticizes the media in general – social media and mainstream media.

Zaatari: The example of the graffiti – is this work that was taken from citizen journalists or work that was produced with ABOUNADDARA?

Kiwan: The film was made by activists in Homs. They were working as citizen journalists, they wanted to tell the story in another way. So, they made this film with a mobile phone and edited it in Homs while under siege. They didn't have any cinematic tools, but they made the film to provoke a distinction for their own practice as citizen journalists, so it was very important. And they wanted us to help them produce the film. We also detonate, or subvert, some images of soldiers of Assad's army. On other films we took images from YouTube and put them into a new framework, so we try to rebuild these images so they communicate things in another way, just like this testimony of a citizen journalist criticizing the mainstream media after working with them for many months.

Zaatari: So, they were critical of themselves and the media they had been working with. The uprising in Egypt also gave way to citizen journalists, but we see them much more in practice in Syria. The situation gave room to people simply chronicling what's happening around them. How do you make sense of all of it? For me, it looks like there is an enormous amount of material, and I don't know – how does it impact the world? I only know it is an unprecedented resource, not necessarily in its value as evidence but also in its value as distortion. So, how do you see all of this?

Kiwan: We have a big problem because there is confusion; a problem of credibility. We don't know, because of the regime; because the regime made the situation impossible for journalists to work in Syria, so the viewer has this sense that the images aren't true. What can we do about this? Of course citizen journalists are doing very important work. We know things about Syria because they're still working, and they're dying for this, but we don't have the right to accept the material just as it is. We have to double-check the information, we have to rework the images, because, for example, if we represent victims, we don't have the right to represent them like activists, yet citizen journalists are filming them regardless, so here we have an editorial responsibility, if you will, as filmmakers, as journalists. So we try here to tell our friends, the citizen journalists we work with, that they can do things in other ways. They give us many of their images and we work with them, but we want to show them that it's possible to deal with these images in new ways, simply because it's necessary to convince viewers to really ask themselves if [what they're seeing] is true or not.

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Zaatari: How do you position yourself with regards to poetry? I'm just trying to take your work in the collective somewhere else, away from your relation to direct actuality.

Kiwan: Poetry and religion are a huge part of our background. If there is a specificity, a national specificity somewhere, I think it should be there. As a Syrian, I grew up with part of my mind occupied by poetry and religion, more than as a citizen of a European country, so our language as filmmakers has to be able to translate this reality. But we have to protect cinema from too many allegories and metaphors. It's very difficult to be a poet in film and not to use the ease by which poets use metaphors and talk nonsense.

Zaatari: I'm just bringing to the floor something Mahmoud Darwish said in a [Jean Luc] Godard film [Notre Musique]: Societies that do not produce poets do not have a place in history. Ironically, he was commenting on Palestinians although he is a Palestinian poet. This is a question I always have in my mind – I try to look for the conflict that produced poetry. Is it impossible to think of poetry when you are consumed by revolution or war? You insist on calling it an uprising, of course rightly so. And so Mahmoud Darwish keeps asking: Where is the poetry and beware of where there is no poetry.

Kiwan: I think it is a very important question when we are speaking about tragedy. If you consider tragedy as showing dead people, you betray; you give the viewer a very poor idea of tragedy. Take the Holocaust – if you remember the first images of the camps – those images don't tell us anything else. We see corpses piled up. Our memories as viewers are saturated with those images, and we cannot imagine the scale of the tragedy if we just see those images. But if I give you a testimony– if you see the tragedy through the eyes of a child – for example, we filmed children telling stories about massacres – then you can feel how big the tragedy was. We can imagine, and poetry is imagination. I have a duty to give you space for imagination; we have a responsibility and a duty to always keep the largest possibility for imagination open when we show reality. It's really very important.

Zaatari: Here's a question I had in mind while watching the films. All the films were shot in Syria, right? But does the revolution go beyond that? In other words, is the tragedy taken in its literal form within the geography of Syria, or does the tragedy go beyond those forms and therefore could it include interviews or works that are produced outside geographic Syria?

Kiwan: We don't know if the films were shot in Syria. Nobody could know, because we don't give any information about place. The idea here is also to confuse people. We want the universal viewer to recognize himself, his place, his country in this Syrian place and voice. We want him to imagine that he could be there. So, some of the films were shot inside Syria and some outside.

Zaatari: But the subject is very much Syria.

Kiwan: Maybe. Not always. In Media Kill, for example, he does not say "Syria". In many of the films, if you see them in another context, you can imagine – well, of course the characters are speaking Arabic, but if you're French or German, you don't know if they're Egyptian or what.

Zaatari: Of course – in the first clip, The Wall, I thought: is this in Syria or not?

Kiwan: It's Damascus.

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Zaatari: Thanks for confirming. And here, I think the specificity of this work lies in the fact that there is an issue of class, or let's call it cultures within the same culture, that is addressed, and I think this takes the film elsewhere. I was hoping to see more of this in the rest of the films, but of course the idea of a collective comes from a Marxist perspective and therefore addressing the revolution. You don't seem to have an ideological framework though, or do you? Are you really interested in shaking people's ideological grounds, or is there more?

Kiwan: We have no god, no master. [Audience laughs] We are filmmakers and we are criticizing the Syrian Army, the regime, the Free Syrian Army, religious authorities, the media. In *The Wall* we wanted to represent this energy – as I said before, we have a very young society which cannot accept any form of tutelage whatsoever. It's sociological. We just wanted to suggest that with this kind of society, we can't have a regime like Assad's regime, and of course we try to show context, but without any Marxist or theoretical or intellectual perspective. We just allow our work to be open-ended, to suggest that there are many aspects of reality, because the danger is to stereotype and reduce this general and popular uprising to stereotypical characters, places and events.

Zaatari: ABOUNADDARA was a collective interested in film and society before the uprising. Will it continue when the uprising is over? Do you think about that? If, in a month, the uprising is over?

Kiwan: Honestly, I don't know. I don't know how we did all this work. We've been working for three years exactly, all volunteer, no funding, and we never know if we'll succeed in making another film next Friday. So it's really a miracle because we don't have any organization, any funding, we just have a strong desire to participate with our people, to go on with this struggle until the end, so I don't know. I don't know what we can do after that.

Zaatari: One of the things that struck me when we met a few months ago was you saying that the collective wanted to put in the foreground some sort of appreciation of life, not to say celebration of life, so is this still the case or has this changed over the three-year period since 2011? I say that in the context of excluding direct violence from the films and being more into recording daily life.

Kiwan: I think we try to do so, even though the tragedy forces us toward a direction. But if you consider *The Islamic State for Dummies*, the most important part of the film is the laugh of the filmmaker – she's a woman in front of a spokesman of the Islamic order and she laughs. These kinds of details of everyday life we try to celebrate. In the beginning, the filmmaker wanted to cut those details and we thought, in general in the collective, that we didn't need to put our egos and names on the films. But actually we told her: "It's not your laugh, it's not you; it's a Syrian society laughing, so we cannot cut your laugh." If you want to resist death and tragedy, you have to show life and detail from everyday life, so we really try to celebrate those moments because it's the only way to keep faith in the future and in life.

Zaatari: Is it also a faith in the ability of a documentary practice to see something in a conflict that other forums are unable to? I'm not sure, myself – I'm not jumping to conclusions – but, for example, political or critical texts or journalistic analyses?

Kiwan: There is a huge tendency, which is growing, towards misery and voyeuristic, pessimistic misery, which is very dangerous because if you represent reality without hope, without space for life

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and hope, you prepare the viewer to accept the idea that it's finished; that there's no hope for these people to change their situation. So, it's our political duty and our duty as filmmakers to open more and more space for hope, love, imagination. We cannot separate the filmmaker from our commitment as citizens.

Zaatari: One of the highlights of our conversation, and it's something you've told me about before, was your encounter with Ighra', the actress, and as much as this is a powerful image, I really look forward to seeing that image reenacted in Syrian popular culture, now and in the future. How possible is this?

Kiwan: I don't know. When I saw *The Islamic State for Dummies*, I thought that the filmmaker's laugh was somehow a translation of the surprise I felt when I saw Ighra' naked. We can't repeat the same experience. Now we can't even surprise kids with naked women. We are naked all the time. We are living in a voyeuristic culture, but we have to maintain this same idea; to reserve a space for subversion and to surprise the viewer; to provoke something violent and beautiful in their body. We try to do this, and I'm sure that people who demonstrate against the regime and try to organize society and to resist could do this in the future, if it's possible for them to stay alive.

<http://profiles.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18433/abounaddara%E2%80%99s-take-on-images-in-the-syrian-revolut>

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Part II

Mejcher-Atassi: I would like to come back to two things: First, this countermovement, if I understood you correctly, Charif, between the images that circulate in the mass media and the images that you produce and circulate. So, how do you counter images with images, and can you say a little more about the power and flaws or shortcomings of images? Could you also talk about the role of the image in the Syrian uprising and the prevalence of the image over the word, since you mentioned poetry, Akram? Certainly, the image has come to play a very dominant role in the revolution.

My other question is linked to this political urgency and how you position yourself vis-à-vis political commitment and activism and how the urgency of the political situation has pushed you in directions that have perhaps surprised you or were unforeseen or that, as a filmmaker, pushed you to set foot on new territory.

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Kiwan: Thank you, Sonja. I don't know if it's possible to answer that. It's been forty years since the Vietnam War, a war that started something we are still experiencing now: the hegemonic role of the media and especially TV. In this time, TV has entered our minds with a representation of war that banalized violence and reduced the force and power of the image. I refer here to the work of the French scholar Dork Zabunyan. Now, we can watch tragedy on TV, the Syrian tragedy on current news reports, and continue eating dinner. This is not acceptable. It was not imaginable before the Vietnam War. So, let's speak plainly: Because of TV, violence has become banal and the image has lost its power. We have to find a new way to restore the power of images. That's how I see our work in historical perspective. We are trying to restore something, sometimes using TV codes; our films are short and we use TV codes, to subvert them. That's how I see our experience as filmmakers – and activists, if you want, but activists making use of cinema.

[Open to floor]

Q: I have a technical question, about format. Is there a difference between the films we saw today, as clips, and the feature-length film? I ask because of Akram's question of authorship, but also because you mentioned temporality.

Kiwan: The idea is the same in both cases: we try to invent narrative strategy to communicate this breakdown. So, here we have very short films. When we made the feature film (<https://vimeo.com/87259134>), we tried to keep the same idea to give you fragments, the collapse, and not to give a traditional narrative with heroes and victims; to show the complexity. So, here we do the same thing with fragments that come every week. With the other film, we put those fragments together and tried not to lose this aspect. Basically, we refuse to reduce the revolution to stereotypical characters. We refuse to tell the story of the revolution through a traditional narrative of events, escalation and characters. What we have here is an extraordinary event, a rupture in history that needs to be translated visually. We found the solution to this visual interpretation through the weekly short film. We also tried to maintain the same spirit when working on the feature film, but to reach the same result we had to break up and fragment the films and deal with them as components rather than films. And so we fragmented them and re-edited them as segments, then we introduced new material that we got either from YouTube or other sources.

I would like to add that we have been making movies for three years, during which we have defied TV and the mass media in general and told them that we can disseminate our films without their help. Thanks to the public and people like you, who have followed our work, people in television finally came to us, acknowledged our presence, and asked us to make a film on the condition that it followed a 52-minute format.

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We used our material, because we have a following public and because other filmmakers, film festivals, and colleagues started acknowledging us. We told the television people that we would do the film as long as they accepted our language and wouldn't impose any voiceover additions on us or other tools that television uses for purposes of simplification. We asked them to accept our fragmented language because we wanted people to get a sense of this revolution without subjecting our work to the stereotypical narratives usually imposed by TV. So, the resulting film represents a meeting point, on the one hand, between our demands as filmmakers to get TV to acknowledge a different kind of language to represent this reality, and on the other, TV finally admitting its need to incorporate a new language that would represent reality in Syria.

One more thing: By doing this, TV accepted a language that is not its own. That was a big compromise because they consider our language a difficult one that the public might not be able to understand. So, on the one hand, they accepted our language, but on the other, they aired our film around midnight, so nobody saw it.

Zaatari: Most art films are actually shown [late at night].

Kiwan: The next step is to convince TV to air our film at 8pm, when everybody is watching.

Zaatari: But you don't need to look up to television as a platform.

Q: I think maybe we're missing some of the more important issues in your approach to making films. I really like this idea of the bullet film – very short, a one-minute thing – and I liked that each of them dealt with one thing; didn't try to tell a story, didn't try to explain, didn't try to tell us anything, just simply showed us by juxtaposing a sound with an image in a moment, and it made us either feel something or understand something. In that sense, it approaches poetry because a poem succeeds by stringing a few words together that give you an understanding you couldn't get except by that stringing together. In the same way, the image of the Hafez al-Assad statue made me understand dictatorship a lot more than many books one reads about dictatorships. Maybe we don't even need the sentence at the end! That slow moving forward, the eyebrow, the hard-set mouth were enough to help me feel something about that –

Kiwan: His hand...

Q: Exactly. So, that, in a way, even goes beyond the Syrian revolution in terms of an approach to film, style, to getting a sense, an idea, a concept across to an audience.

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Kiwan: Thank you. I don't know if you noticed the manipulation we did in this film with Hafez al-Assad's statue. We put a Koranic verse on the statue that addresses the story of Cain and Abel and embodies the peaceful speech of the Syrian revolution, as if we're telling Assad "we realize you're pushing us to take up arms, but we refuse to do so even if you attack us." In the same vein, Abel told Cain that he would not raise his hand against his brother even if he tried to kill him.

The viewer cannot even notice this addition because it becomes part of the image. The same Koranic verse was raised by protesters. We only took the slogan and added it to the image. We did this to prove to the regime that, indeed, we are manipulating and fabricating images. The regime claims that all rebels manipulate and falsify images. We, as filmmakers, unlike reporters and media people, have the right to fabricate and manipulate images.

Q: Do you feel this tension between the contextualization of scholarship and the complexity necessitated by reality, and now as a filmmaker perhaps you feel that things should be simpler? Do you feel a tension between your old career and your new one?

Kiwan: Part of the filmmaker's work involves research and an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms underlying society. Without a doubt, a filmmaker is just like a researcher – they have many factors in common. A filmmaker first has to study and objectively understand how a certain society functions. Other members of the collective and I come from a background in sociology. However, we carry with us a sense of disappointment. I am not about to address the field of sociology in Syria and Arab countries. Nevertheless, I believe that researchers have failed to depict the reality in Syria and to protect the Syrian society from the reductionism of both the regime and the media. One of the reasons we were prompted to get involved in filmmaking was our bitter disappointment with the failure of researchers, who spent years in our country, to protect us. Why were they unable to show the media and the world that this society is not merely divided into Muslims and Christians, or Sunnis and Alawites, or whatever. There is a bursting energy within this society, which is undergoing a true revolution, akin to what other societies have gone through. So, from these feelings of bitterness and great disappointment, we are trying, through our work, to portray this complexity and richness that researchers have failed to do.

Q: I was just wondering if you'd considered using TV images and reusing them in your works?

Kiwan: Sometimes we did so. We made some films with Syrian TV images, and we don't have any problem with that. We are preparing a new film with these kinds of images.

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Q: When I think of this distinction that was raised between images as evidence pertaining to the regime – understanding that this proves X or Y – and images that open a door to a reconfiguration, in this case, what about truth? It seems like maybe there is a duty to actually say what’s wrong in the world with a clear and coherent narrative voice. Maybe that’s not the artist’s job or anyone’s job, but to me this is still a problem. And lastly, when you say that the regime says “images are doctored, don’t believe them” and then you embrace manipulation, that seems reasonable – you embrace this distortion of reality, but what about actually finally settling on a new representation? How does that work?

Kiwan: As artists and filmmakers, we don’t have the power to tell the truth. We have our own beliefs and we have a responsibility to represent. In all languages, representation is a responsibility upheld by both the artist and the politician who represents the people. Our job is not to impose our beliefs, but rather portray this society in such a way that people are prevented from imposing a certain truth on us. This is a diverse society, of which I am a part. To maintain credibility, I need to let the images I present convince both you and those who do not think like you. So, the only thing I can do is to allow images to reach the common feelings and factors that all people share. From that point on, each will seek the truth they desire. My duty is to put the viewer on a certain path and point to where to search for truth. That is the most I can do. The regime is saying that the Free Syrian Army consists of terrorists who murder people. What I am telling the viewer is: “Yes, there are members of the Free Syrian Army who kill. Watch and listen to what they are saying, then try to reach a conscious verdict and make sense of what it means for a freedom fighter to kill.” I cannot become part of this dispute and

claim that the regime is lying and is responsible for all the killings. If I do that, only those who share my version of the truth will watch my work. My job is to help people confront a multifaceted reality and get them to start questioning themselves and search for what they have in common. I would like to add something: When I show a militant confessing to murder, and although I support the revolution that he is part of, I am saying that, from my position as a filmmaker, any person, whether pro or anti-revolution, can lose his humanity if put under extreme circumstances. By doing so, I am laying the founding principle on which I can build my question about truth.

Q: First of all, I disagree with what you said that there is no criminal party and that it is only conditions that lead a certain party to commit crimes. I beg to differ. In this equation, the regime is definitely criminal, and we can say openly that the regime is criminal by default and that no existing conditions forced it to become so. This regime is criminal, then we can discuss the reasons for this criminal nature. The second point I would like to make is in regards to the second film on the Free Syrian Army. It is

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indeed very important that you address such an idea, admit the mistakes committed by the revolution, present the other point of view. It shows a very high sense of consciousness and a desire to shift the course of events toward the right track. However, I have to wonder if by adopting such an approach, you are not slipping into the trap of stereotyping. You said that the regime claims that the Free Syrian Army is committing acts of murder, then you presented an example of a Free Syrian Army member who committed such acts. This would only reinforce, for the viewer, this stereotypical narrative. Are all members of the Free Syrian Army murderers? Do they all admit to such crimes and feel remorse?

Kiwan: Ninety-nine percent of our films point to the criminality of the regime. There is no issue in identifying the criminal in this scenario. For us, the situation is crystal clear: there is a society confronting a criminal regime. This is the nature of the conflict we are living. We believe that we are currently experiencing a violent clash between a society struggling for its freedom and a criminal regime. Out of the 150 or 160 films we've made, there are at least 100 films that expose the extent of the regime's crimes, including the film about Nousour Souriya [The Eagles of Syria] military indoctrination taking place and those who use barrel-bombs. There is no confusion here. We believe that the criminal nature of the regime is an obvious fact. After stating that the regime is criminal, we went deeper and explored a different level – that of the individual militant and what goes on inside his mind. When I work on the image of a militant, obscure his face, and name the film "The Unknown Soldier," I am allowing any militant and anyone who ever carried arms to identify himself with this image. I did not give a stereotypical image of the Free Syrian Army. I did not present its members in a YouTube kind of video in which a member of the Free Syrian Army is standing behind the banner of his brigade. If I did that, I would be creating a stereotypical image. What I am doing is breaking this stereotypical image and presenting a figure whose identity is obscured so as to allow viewers to identify with him and put themselves in his shoes. It is because I'm looking to break the pattern of a stereotypical victim opposite a criminal that I am saying that any person, under certain extreme conditions, can lose his humanity, whether because he is feeling oppressed or carrying arms or for whatever reason. If we do not say so at this crucial moment, we will be endorsing a political rhetoric that claims that there is a victim facing a criminal, that conviviality is impossible between the two, and that there is no option but to divide, kill, and exclude. A filmmaker, on the other hand, says that this is the concern of politicians who fight each other and use their political tools of rhetoric and slander. My duty is to remind people that there is a common humanity that is currently under threat due to extreme conditions. I am reminding viewers that they have a responsibility to uphold. Their responsibility is not to cheer for one side or the other. Their responsibility, when viewing the testimony of this militant, for example, is to start asking themselves how they can contribute to

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improving these conditions, regardless of their political opinion. If I present viewers with a fixed perspective of a victim versus a criminal, they can't do anything about it. I am presenting them with an image that confuses and troubles them so that they imagine themselves in a similar position and feel compelled to try to prevent such an outcome.

Zaatari: I just want to highlight that very often the role of the intellectual is to be very critical of an intellectual's entourage, or an intellectual's side. Sometimes it is very easy to blame or criticize the criminal, the other, the enemy. It takes much more effort and time to convince the oppressed that they could be the oppressor, too, and I think this work does that very well.

Q: There's been talk about fabrication. I believe that art is completely different from fabrication. Art is a creative and genuine process in which an image engages and affects the viewer. An artist creates out of his own reality and what he sees. I believe there is something touching in most of these films, such as the one about a statue that is well known to all Syrians. In my opinion, this is creativity rather than fabrication. Fabrication is a term that perhaps has to do more with the media and is closer to lying, while art is more of a genuine process.

Zaatari: I do not think that Charif uses fabrication in the sense of falsification. Fabrication as a term originally means construction, such as the construction of an image. Any creative process will basically require a process of fabrication. For creativity to occur, fabrication must take place.

Kiwan: Of course. Thank you, Akram, for reminding us of this interpretation. I would like to add here that using the term "fabricated" presupposes the existence of non-fabricated images. When the regime says "there is media fabrication," or when the opposition shows images and says, "this is the truth," both parties are lying to the public and engendering the assumption that there is an absolute truth. However, I intentionally use the term fabricate to remind people that an image is a lie, a fabrication, and a reinvention of reality. Accordingly, it is our duty to remind viewers that this image does not reflect reality; rather, it's one perspective on reality, and thus it is open to doubt and interpretation. When I manipulate images as such and use the term "fabricated," I'm doing so to protect the viewer and to dissuade him from implicitly believing in what I am saying, because I am presenting him with a fabricated image and I am showing him that I am fabricating it. Despite that, I also want the viewer to have a pure human experience. So when I use the term "fabricated," it is because I am taking responsibility for my profession and saying that an image does not reflect truth, but rather a certain perspective, and a certain narrative that is open to criticism and doubt. It is on this basis that we should deal with any given image, and those who distinguish between a real and a fabricated image are the same ones who want to oppress and muzzle society. This is not what I set out to do. I want the public to doubt everything, myself included.

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Q: ABOUNADDARA has produced 140 to 150 bullet films and one feature film. Do you feel you can continue with this very strict bullet format that you have adopted over the last three years, or will the ABOUNADDARA collective search for new forms? What would such forms be like, bearing in mind the challenge posed by your refusal – using Charif’s word – to adopt a traditional narrative?

Kiwan: I don’t know. The only thing I know is that we have a desperate desire to restore the power of the image and redeem our society, whose image has been violated. We are trying to do so using the tools currently available to us. I do not know if we can carry on like this. We are very tired. We try to carry on. We feel happy and revitalized whenever we encounter people who follow our work and ask us intelligent questions. Whenever something positive is written about us, we feel energized and decide to keep going. At other times, we ask ourselves “what’s the point?”, feel that it’s all useless, that no one is watching our work, and that we might lose our drive. I don’t know. I think it has more to do with the public, with life, whether we keep on living or we die. I do not know. I really cannot give you an answer.

Zaatari: Just to say a final thing. You’re all very, very tired, yet this work seems so fresh and it just brings hope, not necessarily in Syria, but hope in the medium, that’s documentary film. I disagree with you on the wording of the phrase “restore power to images.” I think we need to go through an exercise of working, conversation with images, whether we understand them or we understand gaps in them, weaknesses or even their lack of power. We do not need to restore power to images, because restoring power is also too oppressive. Imagine images to be as powerful as regimes!

Kiwan: Wow!

Zaatari: What would this imply about us? I do not look forward to a time when images will rule. Many of us artists in Beirut have worked a lot revealing hidden layers of power in images. You cannot face glorifying images of oppressors with images of their victims. You cannot face glorification with another glorification, even if it were of victims. There is a need for such a critique to take place, equally in postwar times and at war, in my opinion. Let’s just take the power away from images. Let’s simply consider them as records of power, political positions, social and personal attitudes or unknown circumstances or attitudes. Let’s try to unmake images or simply try to understand where they come from.

Kiwan: ABOUNADDARA’s position is fundamentally anti-antiauthoritarian and iconoclastic. We have always treated the “heroes” of the revolution with suspicion, as in Warning (00:38). We have made several films, denouncing the glorification of victims, such as Two Minutes for Syria (01:26). The power of images I’m talking about has nothing to do with any attempt at

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domination. Rather, it has to do with defending the power to represent the world without freezing it in its current temporality. In other words, it is about ensuring that images remain dialectical and lightning, in the words of Walter Benjamin, to avoid any form of propaganda or idolatry. Amen!

<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/19080/abounaddara%E2%80%99s-take-on-images-in-the-syrian-revolut>