

Emergency Cinema

An Interview with Syrian Collective *Abounaddara*

Cécile BOËX

Since April 2011, a collective of Syrian filmmakers has been working on behalf of a people fighting for its freedom. Their short films invent a new cinematographic language adapted to the urgency of the situation. *Abounaddara* tells the story.

The cinematographic mobilisation of the Syrian collective *Abounaddara*

To begin with, *Abounaddara* was a production company specialised in documentary cinema. It was founded in Damascus in 2010 by three associates unknown in the film industry, and has since made around twelve short films about ordinary people, presenting a mirror image of Syrian society. These films are available online on the [Abounaddara](#) website. For the first time, Syrian films are being shown uncensored and with no accompanying explanation other than the name of the production company. On 15 April 2011, one month after the beginning of the uprising, the company published a short film entitled “*Que faire?*” (“What to do?”) on its [Facebook](#) page, highlighting the need to produce images that are worthy of the Syrian people’s struggle for freedom. Since then, *Abounaddara* has transformed into a collective of self-taught, anonymous filmmakers working in the sphere of “emergency cinema”. It publishes a very short film on its website every Friday, the main day for demonstrations. The action taken by the collective gives rise to a unique cinematographic writing that sheds new light on the questioning of socially engaged art.

La Vie des Idées: What was the motivation behind this change in direction, and how did it affect the way you make films?

Abounaddara: Making films in a country like Syria means choosing between two possibilities: either collaborating with a unique narrative system that is sanctioned by unrelenting censorship, or else resisting. We chose to resist. However, unlike our older colleague Omar Amiralay, who was the first to do so, we had no public, or any material with which to interest distributors.

<p>Omar Amiralay is a key figure in Syrian and Arabic cinema. He was a self-taught filmmaker who, during a stay in France, chose to absorb as many images as possible at the Cinémathèque rather than attend classes at the IDHEC (Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies), eventually giving up the course. In 1969, he returned to Syria and took up documentary filmmaking, then considered a minor genre, as a way of combating the</p>

pretences of Ba'athist ideology and challenging a regime that aimed to control everything. His films, resolutely engaged, have an individual approach shaped by a polished style and an original aesthetic. The three films he made in Syria, *Film Essay on the Euphrates Dam* (1969), *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* (1972) and *The Chickens* (1978) are true masterpieces. In the early 1980s, when Syria was on the brink of civil war, Omar Amiralay was forced into exile in France, where he pursued his career. He returned to his homeland at the end of the 1990s. He played an active part in the Damascus Spring, a protest movement led by Syrian intellectuals and artists which was sparked by Bachar al Assad's coming to power in 2000. In 2003, he made a coproduction with Arte called *The Flood in Baath Country*. Despite waiting so long, he never saw the revolution, because he died suddenly of a heart attack in February 2011 at the age of 66, a few weeks before the first demonstrations began. *Abounaddara* paid tribute to him in a text that accompanied its first short film, repeating a phrase that comes at the end of *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* (still banned in Syria): "This is our country. Any onlooker who does not act accordingly is either a coward or a traitor".

That is why we took up the position of a sniper, lying in ambush behind apparently harmless short films distributed anonymously on the Internet in 2010. We were hoping to reach our public right under the censors' nose. And our hopes seemed to be coming true, because a few months after our website went live, we had already found the means to produce two series of short documentary films that also had to be made more or less clandestinely¹. In short, we were already lying in wait when the revolution erupted in March 2011. We were even preparing another skirmish, strengthened by the public support we were beginning to receive. The question was not, therefore, whether or not we should get involved in the revolution, but rather how to do so, and what was the best approach to take. After a month of trial and error, we made what was to be our first very short weekly film, entitled *The Infiltrators*², a disparaging expression used by Bachar al-Assad to refer to the anti-regime demonstrators. The film portrayed an elderly Damascan artisan letting loose against the Assad regime in a monologue that showed the personal, deep-rooted resilience of the Syrian revolt. The film, however, was made with images shot years earlier. It heralded two changes in the way we made films: a shorter format, and a more polished style that favours static shots, practically eliminating all camera movement.

An eclectic cinema

La Vie des Idées: Your films use very diverse techniques. You make use of images shot before the revolution – very often recontextualised with a soundtrack – of witness accounts, photomontages, etc. They also borrow from a wide range of registers: video clips, film-tracts, adverts. What is it that guides your eclecticism and what is the thread that links all your films together?

¹ After our short film series was broadcast, some private partners committed themselves to financing the production of our series on the Syrian brown bear, which was officially intended to bring back people's memories of this mythical animal that has become an endangered species in its own country, but which, in fact, aimed to undermine the foundations of Ba'athist ideology and its primary symbol, the lion, the word for which is "assad" in Arabic. Furthermore, an international organisation commissioned a series of films on child labour in Syria.

² In Arabic, *al-mundassûn*. This name has been taken up once again by revolutionaries, as an act of bravado.

Abounaddara: Our project is basically part of the tradition of original documentary cinema, as shown by most of our very short films offering sequences from people's lives or extracts from interviews, which we choose to film with closeness and empathy. However, we are working in a state of emergency and are subject to constraints that may or may not be justified, including access to film sites, safety of those filmed, social developments or the state of the Internet connection. We can also say that we take pleasure in working in an emergency situation because we feel an unprecedented sense of freedom. And that feeling of freedom carries us from one register to another by happily blurring the boundaries, including the one that separates documentaries and fiction. Besides, that confusion is a general characteristic of our films ([*Everything Is Under Control Mr. President*](#); [*My name is May*](#); [*The Mufti Wants to...*](#); [*End of Broadcast*](#)). We make aesthetic and political choices that portray the way in which our reference points have been turned upside down by the revolution. It also conveys our pledge to represent our people's enthusiasm by ensuring they are not reduced to stereotyped characters, places or formats. On a more basic level, the blurring reflects the fact that our revolution is only in its initial, early stages. And we are all the more committed to that task because television is attempting to normalise this great revolutionary moment of rupture and confusion, fulfilling its function of social control. Besides, television showed what it is capable of doing, when during the Egyptian revolution, channels all around the world began showing us images of Tahrir Square occupied by the crowds, with a red banner flashing across the bottom of the screen to hammer home the fact that this is The Revolution! And yet, by associating a general popular uprising with a particular place, television conditioned the people, much as Pavlov did in his famous experiment with dogs. And it was quite successful, in as much as we all thought the revolution was over when the televised news broadcasts showed us images of Tahrir Square given over to traffic. This means that those who produce images have a great responsibility when representing the revolutionary movement. They must also accept that responsibility without avoiding the issue, by understanding their task of representation, just like any other representatives of the people.

La Vie des Idées: The limited media access on the ground, which was imposed by the regime, reveals a paradox as regards the images of the revolution that reached us: they are rare, whereas the videos filmed by demonstrators and activists are uploaded in their hundreds every day on YouTube. How do you fit in to this revolutionary film landscape? What does your work say in particular? Are amateur videos a source of inspiration?

Abounaddara: It is hard to talk calmly about images of the Syrian revolution because they are such a vital source of information, because they have cost so much blood and tears, and because they are the subject of an idolization overflowing with humanitarian reasons. From our point of view, we believe these images express a twofold impotence: that of a defenceless people trying to snatch their freedom from a soldiery of the most barbaric kind, and that of the people filming the images, who are trying to come to terms with a revolutionary saga using devices that are particularly ill-adapted because television has quickly used them to its own advantage.

Indeed, television was quick to impose its own codes by appropriating certain images broadcast on the social media, then by dealing directly with those activists in buying their rushes and giving them precise orders regarding the filming and choice of subjects. It thus channelled the flow of images that, for a while, had seemed to be slipping away and succeeded in imposing a particular format. In doing so television managed to create a distorted image of the revolution by portraying it as just another conflict, with its set of clichéd images of suffering and bloodshed, as well as by sanctioning a collection of

“spokespeople” and “representatives” of dubious legitimacy. In other words, television did its usual job of dumbing down, formatting and manipulating, by taking away everything that was original and authentic about the revolution to the point that the activists it had incorporated or corrupted by turning them into subcontractors are now starting to rebel, as suggested in the film [Media Wants to Topple Humanity!](#)

As filmmakers, we could not resign ourselves to seeing the images of our revolution fall into the hands of television, which has always been a major intermediary for the dictatorship in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab world. That is why we decided to mobilise by tackling the issues of the revolution with film devices. We wanted to provide counter-information by making short weekly films that put forward not an alternative truth but a unique narrative that would involve the audience in a human way, far from any political or national consideration. Once again, we owed it to ourselves to show our people’s exceptional resistance by protecting them from any kind of stereotyping or prefabricated media pigeonholing.

As far as the films themselves are concerned, they contain some images and sounds we created ourselves and others borrowed from the videos of anonymous activists using social media, like those in [REC](#) or [October](#). The videos shot by anonymous activists generally seek to express commitment, grief, or a call for help, which we try to honour as such without idolising them or projecting our cinematographic intentions onto them. Our collective also includes people who occasionally make videos and broadcast them anonymously on YouTube. It also includes citizen-journalists who have made reports for al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya. One of these lost everything in his hometown of Homs, and since then his life has been a series of woes. Despite this, he gave our group three of his most anti-pessimistic films, including [Zeina](#).

The audience

La Vie des Idées: For whom do you make your films? How are they perceived by the various audiences you have encountered?

Abounaddara: We make films because it is the most useful thing we can do for the revolution. However, we do not subscribe to activist cinema that wallows in self-segregation by preaching to the converted. Instead we speak to the audience on the basis of a shared humanity, regardless of any political or national concerns. In fact, the Arabic-speaking public can access our work more easily. The foreign public also seems to have taken an interest, however, especially in Europe where festivals often request films from us even before we have released their subtitled versions.

Having said that, we have always taken great delight in confusing the issue by playing on the real or imagined differences that characterise our public here and elsewhere. One of the rare films whose title makes reference to the name of our country, [Syria Today](#), shows a steam train similar to that which has haunted people’s collective memory since the Second World War. Another, dedicated to [The Syrian Street](#) shows an old taxi driver straight out of neorealist Italian cinema, who is looking for the way to Damascus while we hear a national opera singer commemorate the moment with a tango song. In each case we are trying to show a humanity that is the same everywhere, whatever the views of those who defend “the complicated Middle East” and “the Syrian exception”, who are the same everywhere. However, this

approach bothers a certain left-wing Syrian and European elite that takes pleasure in seeing Syrians as nothing more than victims. For those compassionate souls, our films “do not really represent reality”, for which we have been reproached on more than one occasion.

However, the public we usually have in mind when making our films is the sector that supports the regime. We try to involve those people who are distrustful or hostile by bringing them back to the sphere of pure humanity, especially now, at a time when we are hoping to make films about the Free Syrian Army fighters and the *chabihah* (regime militia). That is also why we have always portrayed Hafez al-Assad with a certain amount of dignity, in spite of everything, as in *The End* and *Then What?* This is also our reason for dedicating one of our best-known films, *I Will Cross Tomorrow*, to the sniper that killed our friend Bassel Shehadeh, the filmmaker who returned to the besieged town of Homs to film and train citizen-journalists³.

We made that film from images shot mostly by Bassel himself, showing him crossing an area guarded by a sniper. It is presented as a posthumous letter from the filmmaker to his killer, its substance saying the words, “You can kill me, but my images will always be there as a witness”. For the end of the film we invited a religious man committed to the revolution to sing a song as a Requiem. However, the religious man chose to sing a profane song that says, “Our martyr is dearer than the Almighty”! In other words, a man of religion showed ferocious iconoclasm by suggesting that the concept of God should be revised after Assad. And our public both at home and elsewhere has had nothing further to say because the film was a tremendous success. This shows us that cinema can allow itself to aim high. It even has a duty to do so, to protect the revolution from snipers and from television, which both share a tendency to aim low.

Article first published in laviedesidees.fr.

Published in booksandideas.net, October 5th 2012, translated by Susannah Dale.

©booksandideas.net

³ Bassel Shahadeh (1984-2012) was a self-taught filmmaker who made several short films from 2006 (see in particular http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eW1bsRBnzFM&feature=player_embedded; <https://vimeo.com/18112012>). He played a very active role in the Syrian revolution when it began in March 2011, before leaving for the United States to study cinema as part of a Fulbright scholarship he received at the University of Syracuse. Three months after arriving in New York, however, he returned with a film he made on pacifist commitment (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2D7wcuHLH58>). He was then active in the Syrian pacifist movement and settled in Homs to film, inform international media and train citizen-journalists in filming and editing. He died on 28 May, the victim of a bomb attack by the Syrian army in the neighbourhood of Homs where he was at the time. In accordance with his wishes, he was buried in Homs and not in Damascus, his home city.