EMERGENCY CINEMA AND THE DIGNIFIED IMAGE: CELL PHONE ACTIVISM AND FILMMAKING IN SYRIA

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One of the most significant aspects of the wave of protests and uprisings that began in Syria in 2011 was the use of the cell phone camera as a tool of documentation, political activism, and creative expression. With professional journalists and major news networks barred from entering the country, Syrian citizens took it upon themselves to record their own protests as well as the violent reactions they provoked from members and supporters of the Assad regime. In the first few months of protests (March–June 2011), these recordings were virtually the only images coming out of Syria. Gradually, however, exiled political activists smuggled cell phones, cameras, and laptops into Syria with the specific aim of documenting protests and violence. By July 2011, a steady flow of videos had started to leak out of the country for global distribution via online platforms or broadcasts on satellite television channels, most commonly Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya.1 Shot from the point of view of those directly involved in the uprisings, the amateur footage uploaded by anonymous protesters has been notable for its seeming disregard for the notions of “quality” institutionalized in professional filmmaking and photojournalism. Made with limited technical means and at great personal risk, these grainy, often pixelated, and shaky handheld videos stood in marked contrast to the photogenic images associated with the Egyptian revolution.2

In recent years, a number of contemporary artists and theorists have examined how the proliferation of cell phone camera technology reconfigures epistemological frameworks of documentary truth. In her essay “Documentary Uncertainty,” Hito Steyerl argues that the generalized “documentary uncertainty” of a media landscape populated by low-resolution JPEG and AVI files has produced an era in which the referential function of images has been overtaken by their affective power:3

Pictures that appear ever more immediate, which offer increasingly less to see, evoke a situation of constant exception, a crisis in permanence, a state of heightened alert and tension. The documentary form thus becomes a major player within contemporary affective economies.4

For Steyerl, the emotional charge of the digital image depends paradoxically on precisely this lack of focus and resolution. Noting the rise of a new terrain of human rights practice that is enacted through digital tools and platforms, Thomas Keenan similarly conjectures that “standard media-based demands (for clarity, representation, explication, visibility)” might now be “overtaken by a new formation of affectively and politically located insistences.”5

This attention to the uncertainty of digital images is also echoed in Adi Kunstman and Rebecca Stein’s assertion that “doubt and suspicion might be rethought as a productive interpretive stance, one with the potential to helpfully destabilize evidentiary claims made in the name of the digital.”6 Kunstman and Stein argue that amateur footage of the Arab uprisings has been framed in the Western media as “strictly evidentiary forms, documents that unproblematically chronicle the political field.”7 They associate this impulse to read the digital sphere as unproblematically transparent with a “facile cyberutopianism” that similarly fails to register the degree to which images emanating from the Middle East “were often the subject of considerable negotiation and contention; were implicated in the production of selective truth claims; were themselves subject to aesthetic codes and norms which rendered some political documents intelligible and others unintelligible.”8 On this basis, Kunstman and Stein argue that instead of privileging the emancipatory potential of digital media, we might alternatively ask what kind of politics are possible in “a digital field saturated by suspicion, interpretive polyvalence, and evidentiary uncertainty?”9

While Kunstman and Stein offer a much needed corrective to the myth of a “Facebook revolution” in the Arab world, their arguments for developing a “hermeneutics of suspicion” in the digital sphere underplay to a problematic degree the extent to which hegemonic powers use states of doubt and paranoia to invalidate dissent in the public sphere.10 Their strategy is dangerous in that a critical distrust of the truth

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claims assigned to digital documents could create a state of hyperbolic doubt. Such a lack of certainty is of particular concern to media activists in Arab countries who struggle to verify and witness human rights violations that have been captured on video. In 2012, Syrians bravely videotaped protests fully knowing that if they were caught with footage on their cell phone they would face certain imprisonment, interrogation, torture, and possibly death. To greet their recordings with automatic or blanket skepticism performs a grave disservice to these heroic acts of testimony.

There is no denying that digital technologies of image-capture and channels of distribution have destabilized traditional verification strategies. Yet in place of Kunstman and Stein’s foregrounding of the loss of certainty within the digital sphere, I would shift the focus away from doubt and suspicion, and ask: To what kind of communities of witnessing do Syrian video activism and filmmaking give rise?

Two projects, Rabih Mroué’s multimedia performance *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012) and Ossama Mohammed’s film essay *Silvered Water* (2014), indicate how cell phone images uploaded by Syrian protesters can consist of a critical reflection on cinematic truth as well as on the medium’s long-standing correlation with death, asking what it means for protestors to document their own death at the hands of the Assad regime. The intimate portrait films produced by the Syrian filmmaking collective Abounaddara (2010–), on the other hand, explore how ordinary Syrians (on all sides of the conflict) resist violence. Instead of perpetuating the state of suspicion that attends digital documents, an alternative framework can reveal how the low-grade videos produced during the Syrian uprisings constitute new forms of embodied witnessing that call into question prevailing models of visual and political representation. In their model of emergency cinema, one finds an expanded conception of human rights that includes the right to a “dignified image.”

On August 21, 2011, a video was uploaded to a YouTube channel bearing the following title: “Syrian Protester Videotaped His Own Death.” In the first shots, heavily pixelated and shaky images of a cluster of apartment buildings can be seen. The cameraman, who remains offscreen for the duration of the video, is filming the violence that has broken out in the streets below. One can hear the sound of gunshots and people shouting, but the blurry images provide no clue of their precise location. Breathing heavily and with clear panic in his voice, the cameraman announces that regime “security forces” have started firing on citizens in the absence of any demonstrations or any other provocation. He hurriedly gives the date and location (July 7, 2011, Karm Elshami—Homs), which serves to anchor the video spatiotemporally. In the seconds that follow, the man aims his cell phone camera at the surrounding buildings. The viewer can make out the ledge of the concrete balcony on which he is standing. The camera moves restlessly as its operator struggles to capture the chaos around him. Yet the task of documenting the event is visibly undermined by the low resolution of his camera which, at times, offers nothing more to see than an abstract field of colored blotches.

About halfway into the video, the cameraman focuses on a building on the other side of a street. As he finally stabilizes the device and reframes the shot to include the bottom corner of the building, a solitary figure can be glimpsed lurking in the shadows cast by the first-floor balcony. Although only
his legs are visible at this point, on replay this figure can be seen more clearly, wearing the green army fatigues common to pro-regime militia and armed forces. The cameraman loses sight of this figure for a few seconds, then tries to compose a stable shot with his cell phone. When he finally relocates the figure on the street, the man has stepped out of the shadows of the building and is now facing the camera. At that moment, it becomes clear that he is clutching a rifle in his hands. In one swift action, the figure lifts up the rifle and aims it directly at the camera or, more exactly, at the man holding it. The rifle can be heard firing before the cameraman has time to react (or perhaps even recognize what is happening). The phone is heard tumbling to the ground.

The screen goes blank, suggesting that the lens of the camera is now facing the floor, followed by a few seconds of complete silence. Then another voice asks the cameraman if he has been shot in the head. Moaning with pain, the cameraman repeats, “I’m wounded, I’m wounded, hurry up, hurry up, I’m wounded.” At the end, there is no way to ascertain if the cameraman is dead or alive.

This anonymous video serves as the focal point of The Pixelated Revolution, a 60-minute lecture-performance by the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué. Since the early 2000s, Mroué has developed a multidisciplinary approach to image analysis that encompasses numerous roles and activities: lecturer, actor, performance artist, theorist, and writer. In his “lecture-performances,” the artist sets up a complex interplay between scholarly modes of address and the theatricality of a scripted monologue delivered in front of a live audience. Sitting at a table with a laptop positioned in front of him and a large projection screen behind him, Mroué uses the footage captured by the nameless citizen from Homs as the basis for an extended reflection on the political and aesthetic implications of the employment of the cell phone camera as tool and weapon in the Syrian revolution.

Mroué’s provisional title for the Homs video, “double shooting,” plays on the sense in which the cell phone camera constitutes one of the main weapons in a war that is being fought with and over images. More specifically, the artist interprets this piece of footage as emblematic of an asymmetrical conflict in which the evidentiary power of the image is pitted against the capacity of the gun to “kill images” and annihilate image makers.13 While the citizen “shoots for his life,” the soldier “shoots for the life of his regime.”14 As numerous commentators have mentioned, one of the first acts the Syrian people performed when they rose up against the Assad regime was to attack images and deface public monuments of the Leader.15 At the same time, protestors used the cell phone to both document and enact their protests. Here, cell phone technology served to create a space in which citizens appeared in public, came before each other, and entered into forms of civic dialogue by means of images.

The regime’s response to this nascent “civil imagination” was twofold. They immediately made it a crime to possess a camera in public space, and they brutally targeted anyone found taking images on a cell phone.16 For the authorities, the threat posed by this weapon was not merely symbolic. Implicit in this legal action is the regime’s recognition that images themselves are agents of political power rather than second-order representations of it. In a parallel move, the Syrian state media apparatus was used to invalidate the images that protestors were circulating through online channels by exploiting the kind of doubt and suspicion that attend digital documents that circulate without any clear or identifiable provenance, as Mustafa Haid has pointed out.17

For Mroué, the technically flawed digital image functions as a counter to the professional images of the Syrian state media apparatus. In this regard, the artist draws a fascinating comparison between the regime’s use of tripods to construct the illusion of a stable, unshakable political order and the heavily pixelated, trembling images that are captured in amateur cell phone videos:

This regime wants to inform us that it is as strong as its image; it is demonstrating to us the clarity of its vision and its purity. Pictures that are taken with the three-legged tripods are a symbol of the system’s strength and its power and permanence . . . . The Syrian revolutionaries have adopted the opposite attitude. They realize that a “clear” image, whether supportive of or antagonistic to their cause, can only corrupt the revolution. The protesters are aware that the revolution cannot and should not be televised.18

In light of these remarks, viewers might be inclined to see the cell phone videos uploaded by Syrian protestors as documents circulating outside of the control of established image regimes. Indeed, one could go as far as to say that their evidentiary power rests on the degree to which they operate outside of the control of established image regimes. Yet, as Mroué also acknowledges, over time these videos have been progressively absorbed into a global media industry that feeds off images of violence from conflict zones. Instead of putting its own journalists in harm’s way, satellite television networks started to outsource that work to citizen journalists who began to report on events that trained journalists are either unwilling or unable to document.19

In the anonymous video analyzed by Mroué, the cell phone camera does more than simply document violent repression—it incites it. If to hold a cell phone is to transform oneself into...
a potential target in the first video, however, it could also function in other instances as a type of protective shield from violence. In other cases, protesters have used the cell phone camera as a type of shield. In one video that went viral in early 2011, a man films the army’s fourth division troops—a unit with a long history of brutally suppressing political opposition—arriving in Derra during the first stages of the civil uprising there. The shaky camera-work and low-resolution images indicate that the footage was most likely shot on a cell phone. One soldier can be heard saying, “Don’t shoot him, there’s a camera.” The cameraman again addresses the soldiers: “The people want to see what’s happening in Derra.” He then starts taunting them: “Shoot me! Go on, shoot me!”

One of the astonishing things about the Homs video is that the cameraman keeps on filming even as the sniper raises his rifle, “the image is shaking, as if the eye of the beholder cannot actually believe what he is seeing.” In fact, Mroué argues that if the cameraman can film with
seeming disregard for his own life, it is because this event is seen through the viewfinder on his cell phone, which creates a sense of visual and psychological detachment from empirical reality:

By watching what is going on through a mediator—the little screen of a mobile phone—the eye sees the event as isolated from the real, as if it belongs to the realm of fiction. So, the Syrian cameraman will be watching the sniper directing his rifle towards him as if it is happening inside a film and he is only a spectator. This is why he won’t feel the danger of the gun and won’t run away.22

In this reading, the cell phone camera becomes an “optical prosthesis,” an unthinking eye that “keeps on watching without really understanding that it might be witnessing its own death.”23 Although Mroué offers a compelling analysis of the video, his interpretation rests on a highly contentious claim: that the Syrian cameraman does not stop filming because he “believes that he will not be killed: his death is happening inside the image.”24 Mroué’s foregrounding of the mediating effects of the camera unsettles the objectivity assigned to citizen journalism.

Just as Mroué invites the viewer to see the Syrian revolution as an “aesthetically digitized event,” the artist’s multimedia performance, Carol Martin notes, “participates in an aesthetic and analytical discourse that claims to represent the real and to tell the truth while openly acknowledging the simultaneous use of fiction to do so.”25 Thus, on the one hand, the artist-theorist states that the Syrian videos are shot “spontaneously, without any reservation, any editing, or any add-ons.”26 On the other hand, he links this footage to a “fictional list of recommendations and directions on how to film manifestations,” which he scandalously likens to Dogme 95’s original manifesto advocating the use of handheld cameras, on-location shooting, diegetic sound, and the avoidance of genre narratives.27 Such a comparison is, of course, problematic, since it collapses the distinction between the Syrians’ avoidance of cinematic artifice borne of absolute necessity and a rejection of filmic illusion as an artistic choice.

Mroué claims that the cameraman in Homs, in viewing his own shooting through the small screen on his mobile phone, experiences the event “as if it belongs to the realm of fiction.”28 This assertion no doubt brings the video closer to the docu-fictional status of the artist’s own performance, but in so doing, it threatens to erase the distinction between the pro-filmic event and the mediated reality captured by the camera. However, at another point, Mroué suggests that the videos made by the Syrian protesters offer direct access to their experiences: “I assume that what the protesters in Syria are seeing, when they are participating in a demonstration, is the exact same thing [my emphasis] that they are filming and watching directly on the tiny screens of their mobile phones.”29 Yet this claim is also tendentious because it suggests that there is a seamless continuity between what the Syrian protesters see on their phones and their embodied perception of the demonstrations.

Theorists of mobile phone aesthetics argue that the medium makes possible a greater convergence between human vision and its technological supplements. Where the tripod setup of cinematography and television negates the physical gestures and movements of the camera operator, the mobile phone foregrounds the link between the body and its optical extension. As Alessandro Amaducci argues, “by nature, the cell phone produces shaky images tied to the immediacy of its portability; it’s a hand that looks, with all the imperfections of the situation. Never before have images been so bound to the presence of the body.”30 The mobile phone becomes a part of a wider shift from a dominant “ocularcentric aesthetic” to an emergent “haptic aesthetic,” defined by new media theorist Mark Hansen as “the capacity of the body to experience itself as ‘more than itself.’”31 Building on this claim, Camille Baker, Max Schleser, and Kasia Molga link the mobile phone to the direct stimulation and embodied sensations associated with early cinema, arguing that mobile phones minutely register human movement and gesture while their technology reconfigures established modes of perception.32

How, then, did Syrians in the early stages of the revolution use the embodied possibilities of mobile media as a strategy in their collective revolt against a violent and repressive political order? To what extent did their videos give rise to a new audiovisual language and, along with that, to a potential reconfiguration of political subjectivity?

These questions are central to Ossama Mohammed’s Silvered Water: Syria Self-Portrait, a documentary composed almost entirely of amateur footage shot by Syrians on their mobile phones. In 2011, Mohammed received a message from a friend telling him that his life was in “real danger” if he returned to Syria. Exiled indefinitely in France, Mohammed was forced to view the uprisings and the ensuing descent into civil war from his computer screen. The experience of watching these events unfold in real time in his Paris apartment produces a sense of dissonance that is mirrored in the interplay Mohammed sets up between raw footage and structured artifice. The first part of the Silvered Water is largely assembled from hundreds of hours of video that the director sourced from online distribution platforms such as YouTube and LiveLeak.
Mohammed sees this material as constituting a new form of collective filmmaking. Indeed, he describes his film as a collaborative work composed of “1001 images of Syria, shot by 1001 Syrians . . . and me.” By editing these disparate pieces of footage, and adding his own voice to the audio-track, Mohammed develops a cinematic essay on the Syrian uprisings as both “a revolution by images and a revolution of images.” This distinction suggests that the images captured by citizens on their cell phones do more than simply communicate a message. Rather, their political potential lies in the liberation of a cinematic imagination that had been stifled under a system of state-managed cultural production. At the same time, the use of the cell phone in public demonstrations opened up a new space of civic participation.

Among the most striking images in Silvered Water are the videos of the protests that were first shot by participants on their mobile phones. In one video, the camera seems to surge with the crowd as it moves through the streets. The images are blurred and heavily pixelated, but the unrestrained movement of the camera constitutes a challenge to the state’s ability both to control images in the public sphere and to choreograph behavior in public space. The political scientist Lisa Wedeen, analyzing the mass spectacles previously organized under the Hafez al-Assad regime, inferred that they were material and symbolic demonstrations of the state’s ability to discipline the bodies of its citizens: “Bodies serve as the apparent and immediate site upon which participation is enforced. The spectacle shows that authorities are able to compel citizens to enact the choreographed movements that iconographically configure worship of the leader.”

In contrast, the jerky and often chaotic camera-work seen in the videos of the Syrian uprising might be described as the physical re-education of a new citizen in the making. In one of the protest videos in Silvered Water, the man holding the camera makes a telling admission: “I don’t know how to film. This is my first time.” Here, then, the process of learning how to film—itself both an act of protest and a documentation of it—is bound up with the reclamation of public space as a site for the mutual recognition and verification of civic rights.

The footage of peaceful protests is followed by a sequence of videos documenting their brutal suppression. Here Silvered Water takes a decisive turn as it shifts from being a reflection on the role of lens-based media in the development of a nascent civil imagination to an interrogation of how the mobile phone camera is implicated in both the witnessing of violence and in its (re)production.

Sometime in the first few months of the uprisings, a video of a teenager arrested and tortured by Bashar al-Assad’s security forces was posted online by the boy’s captors. The teenage boy has been stripped to his underwear and is crouching in a fetal position in the corner of a room. His head is bowed down. In the next shot, he is seen standing facing the camera. His hands dangle limply in front of him, suggesting that he doesn’t have the strength in his wrists to hold them up. Due to the low resolution of the images, his eyes appear as thick black sockets. The subject slowly raises his hands. In the third part of the video, the teenager is framed in a close-up shot as he kisses the foot of an unidentified figure that remains mostly out of the frame. This is followed by footage of the boy being sodomized by one of the men.

Staged for the camera, this document of sexual abuse and ritual humiliation is made all the more disturbing by the intimate presence of the mobile phone. This is followed by excerpts from several other torture videos. In one, another teenage boy is forced to kiss a photograph of the Syrian president while his captors film the event. The boy is repeatedly kicked, slapped, and punched by two men while they shout at him: “Who is your lord?” “Do you want freedom?! Do you want freedom?!” The viewer watches in horror. In these instances, I would argue that the mobile phone camera is not merely a recording device. Rather, it functions as an integral component within the regime’s mise-en-scène of humiliation and torture.

The film critic and curator Rasha Salti contends that the videos produced by protestors in the first few months of the uprisings are fundamentally at odds with the messages transmitted by the state and those affiliated with it: “the first speaks the language of emancipation (speaking, doing, and recording what the regime has prohibited), and the second speaks the language of fear (uninhibited administration of violence, and the threat of social collapse and chaos).” There is no doubt some truth to this, but oppositions of this kind cannot account for the internal differences within regime media practices. In Silvered Water, the shabiha—the feared militias aligned with the al-Assad regime—are using the mobile phone to produce their own form of cinéma vérité. “What’s the camera’s secret?” Mohammed asks at one point in his film. It’s a rhetorical question that he sets against amateur video of a regime soldier kicking several detainees in a room. The victims are huddled on the floor with their backs to the camera. The wall that they’re facing is covered with blood stains. Mohammed likens the actions of the officer holding the camera to a director. “On the head. On the head,” he instructs the soldier who is doing the kicking. In the background we can hear others yelling: “Film it. Film it.” Shot from the perspective of the perpetrators, these films show how the cell phone video, in its clear reliance on cinematic
tropes, is directly implicated in the imagination and execution of political violence.

In *Silvered Water*, these graphic scenes of torture are placed in dialogue with macabre footage that captures the final moments in the lives of “martyred” filmmakers. In one video, an army helicopter is seen hovering above a large group of protestors, followed by chaotic close-ups of bodies in motion, accompanied by the sound of loud and intense screaming. The screen suddenly fills with red. As the camera pulls out, the blood-soaked head of a dead protester appears in the frame. By re-editing this footage, either slowing down the images that appear on the screen or replacing the audio-track with his own voice-over, Mohammed offers a self-reflexive commentary on the fraught relation between the moving image and violence. One low-resolution video captures scenes of civilians running for their lives. The video is shot from behind a window grille that offers a hidden vantage point onto the street and the sound of countless gunshots as people and cars rush across the frame. The numerous bodies that lie motionless on the ground indicate that regime forces have started firing on a demonstration. “This morning,” Mohammed says in his voice-over, “someone took the camera from me.”

While Mohammed is viewing these images thousands of miles away, he addresses the cameraman directly, as if he is standing there alongside him. In the scenes that follow, the audio of the video has been removed except for the sound of the heavy breathing and footsteps of the man (no longer Mohammed) who is holding the camera. The images jerk up and down as he rushes out to survey the massacre that has just taken place and stops to film men carrying away the bloody corpses of victims.

Cinema’s correlation with violence—both imagined and real—is certainly not new. As Joshua Oppenheimer argues, “cinema has long shaped not only how political violence, from torture to warfare to genocide, is perceived, but also
how it is performed.” Oppenheimer makes an important point here: cinema does not just represent or thematize violence but also provides an imaginative resource for the (re)production of violence in the world. In *Silvered Water* this overlap between real and discursive violence is made visible in the scenes where the members of the regime militias self-consciously film their own acts of brutality. These videos may not have cinematic aspirations, but they do draw on the codes and conventions of a variety of different genres (action films, home movies, music videos, and snuff films).

Meanwhile, on either side of the conflict lines, Syrian protesters have created films that also foreground the formal and technical properties of cell phone video. Ambient sound, close-cropped framing, blurred images and pixelation, long continuous shots, shaky and abrupt camera movement all combine to give these videos an immediacy and affective charge that is linked to their very lack of resolution. What matters in each case, beyond the conveyed message, is the clash of aesthetic approaches and communicative strategies that are unleashed in these videos. The dictatorship in Syria has relied upon dominating images or, more precisely, the subject’s relation to them, as its power is largely premised on public adherence to one party, one leader, one God, and a largely univocal visual discourse. For Mohammed, the cell phone “cinema” of the uprisings represents an unruly moment of plurality when that system of coercive compliance was openly contested for the first time in Syria’s modern history.

Close to the midway point of the film, Mohammed narrates the story of a young Syrian, Fouad Balleh, whom he had met at a screening of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959). Balleh tells the director that he wants to establish a film club in his home town of Douma and asks for his help in getting it going. Mohammed replies: “It’s better you start without a filmmaker. Watch and discuss. When you need me, I’ll be there.” Immediately after this sequence, viewers are confronted with the pixelated footage of Balleh’s death; Mohammed extends the concept of the film club to include the imagined community of viewers who are watching the YouTube videos coming out of Syria.

A “cinema of the killer” [*cinema muqattal*], with footage shot by regime soldiers, is followed by the “cinema of the killed” [*cinema qattal*]. Layered over these images is the whirring sound of a film projector, a reminder of the apparatus of film production and exhibition, but the sound is crucially absent in a single close-up shot of a woman mourning. What seems particularly poignant here is the tension between empathetic witnessing and critical distanciation, or structured artifice. A similar dynamic is also present in another sequence in which mothers and fathers are seen grieving over the bodies of their recently departed loved ones. The scene is punctured both by the presence of a cell phone—ringing, vibrating, and then being used to photograph the children’s bodies—and by the director’s interdictions: “Take 1, Take 2, Take 3, Take 4, Take . . . my heart.” Instead of slight variations on the same enacted scene, the successive “takes” enumerate different children who have been killed in the conflict. What does it mean to witness death, Mohammed suggests, through these multiple modalities of digital image production and transmission? In *Silvered Water*, cinema is intimately associated with violence and death, but the medium is also enlisted as a survival tool, a way to live through catastrophe if not to give meaning to it.

The second part of the film is structured around a re-scripted online exchange between Mohammed and Wiam Simav Bedirxan, a Syrian Kurdish schoolteacher who documents her experience of living in Homs when the city was besieged by regime forces and many of its inhabitants were forced to flee for their lives. The two had met on Facebook after Bedirxan (whose middle name means “silvered water” in Kurdish) had sent the exiled director the following message: “If you were here in Homs with your camera, what would you film?” When the aspiring filmmaker later asks Mohammed what she should record, he replies, “Everything,” alluding to the memorable refrain in the Resnais film: “You have seen nothing in Hiroshima.” The advice leaves open the question of what cinema can or should be at a moment when everything in the country is being called into question. In another sense, this “everything” points to the limits of representation when faced with an overwhelming reality.

Bedirxan resolves to stay and shoot rather than flee along with many of the city’s other inhabitants: “I’ll die a free woman, my love. I won’t flee.” She travels for over five hundred kilometers to find a high-quality digital camera, which she then has to smuggle back into the city. The footage shot by Bedirxan serves a documentary function—women being dragged from the streets by security forces, soldiers loyal to the regime raiding apartments, buildings being shelled—but it also asks what should be filmed, if indeed anything, under these circumstances. In Paris, Mohammed downloads the footage that she sends and edits it into a film. When she temporarily disappears, he searches for her in videos on YouTube. The exchange between them is punctuated by Facebook Messenger notifications and Mohammed’s meditations on the impact that exile has had upon him. What is crucial here is not only the documentary evidence that Bedirxan provides, nor her persistence in the face of horrific circumstances, but equally the question of how digital technologies both mediate and make possible an otherwise unbearable existence.
The situation in Syria today bears little resemblance to the wave of protests that took place in the first stage of the revolution. A largely peaceful uprising based on secular principles has been violently thwarted and replaced with an armed conflict fought along sectarian lines. In recent years, media outlets have focused increasingly on the brutality of the ongoing war in Syria, alternating between the grotesque spectacles of executions carried out by ISIS and the abject suffering of the refugee crisis, whereas neither was present as a subject in the first round of videos.

The violence of these later images is focused upon either the viciousness of the perpetrator or the abjectness of the victim—a significant departure from the intimate, pixelated images of protestors in the final moments of their lives. In most cases, these posthumous films have been uploaded by the friends or family of the deceased. Mohammed has no way to obtain permission from the dead to use their images, although he has claimed that an unwritten contract exists between himself and the countless Syrians who endangered or lost their lives filming the uprisings in 2011–12. What would it mean to say that he has an agreement with these men and women? What is the status of these posthumous images once they enter the public sphere? Do artists and filmmakers have a right or even the responsibility to respond to these heroic acts of witnessing? For Mohammed, resistance to the image politics of the regime requires a new kind of image politics—one focused not on violence but on quotidian representations that express the normative ideals of the revolution itself.

Abounaddara describes its practice as a kind of “emergency cinema” on a par with emergency healthcare and other essential provisions. Working in a state of emergency means that the filmmakers are subject to constraints that are out of their control. Beyond limiting access to film sites, war threatens speech, stifles creativity, and disrupts everyday life. For the Syrian filmmakers, emergency cinema is about “disturbing the machine that maintains the rules of the emergency situation, especially the rules of the film and media industries, and inventing new rules of representation.”

Conventional thinking may hold that cinema is a luxury reserved for societies that can guarantee its citizens access to more basic rights (housing, food, education, political freedom). Abounaddara disputes this logic, insisting that its model of cinema is founded on a fundamental human right to make and consume images.

In a number of its works, Abounaddara uses strategies of irony and satire to deliver biting social commentary. The Chickens (2015) cleverly re-edits an advertisement for HYZA chickens which aired in Slovakia that year. The footage of a happy European family gathering around the dinner table is juxtaposed with still images of a truck—advertising the same brand of poultry—being inspected by Austrian police in hazmat suits. A text at the end of the video informs us that “Europe’s closed-door policy caused the death of 71 refugees whose bodies were found in a state of advanced decomposi-
tions of unseating the Leader (Assad) to the intimate and lived challenge to Rabbat suggests, ISIS social order that has been described as medieval. As Nasser sister with the blunt edge of a knife. The film raises disturb-
on his children, telling how he had walked into the kitchen one day to find his son pantomiming the beheading of his sister with the blunt edge of a knife. The film raises disturbing questions about subject formation and mimicry within a social order that has been described as medieval. As Nasser Rabbat suggests, ISIS’s anachronistic worldview presents a challenge to “post-humanistic rationality” and the relativization of moral value systems that goes along with it.46

In the suggestively titled film In the Name of the Father (2013), a well-groomed Damascene woman likens the politics of unseating the Leader (Assad) to the intimate and lived experience of familial relations.47 The woman starts out by positing a scenario in which she could disagree with her father and even reject his authority. In that moment, paternal authority is questioned, but the bond between father and daughter, she explains, still adheres. What the speaker outlines here are the possible grounds through which the opposition within Syria might renegotiate its relation to a state modeled on “a chain of filial piety and paternal authority that culminates and stops, in Assad.”48

In The Team (2015), Abounaddara asks the viewer to think about how the social dynamics of team sports, at once adversarial and filial, map onto internal splits within Syrian society.49 While the soccer team is made up of supporters and opponents of the Assad government, the coaches belong to only one side (that of the regime). This eleven-part series is made up of a series of interviews with each member of the squad. The star player describes his decision to leave the team after he voices his political opinions and receives a series of vague threats that have made him fear for his life. Another player, a soldier in the Syrian Armed Forces, befriends another man who fights for the Free Syrian Army and later agrees to give him ammunition even though he risks execution if his act of treason is discovered.

The stories told by these young men are engrossing, but what matters here is less the individual testimonies than their cumulative impact: together, they give a sense of how men from that generation have had to renegotiate their relationships both to each other and to the state. The athletes suit up for the national team—which actually no longer plays home games on Syrian soil—but opponents are not players from other countries but each other, fellow countrymen battling those with different ideological positions. It is unclear whether the controlled aggression of sports heightens those tensions or provides a way to sublimate them.

These carefully constructed films allow for a level of auto-
critical reflection that is not possible in the pixelated videos documenting protests, shootings, and beatings. The subjects who appear in these short videos express feelings of ambiva-

genre, confusion, doubt, and deep disillusionment. Indeed, as one critic astutely observes, Abounaddara’s interlocutors “frequently question their own memories, interpretations and reactions to events.”50 The result is a kind of open-ended cinematic portraiture that suspends judgment and eschews any simple or reassuring conclusions.

The films and published statements circulated by Abounaddara serve an important function in the ongoing debates among Syrians artists, filmmakers, and intellectuals over the representation of violence within the emerging cinema born out of the 2011 uprisings. Abounaddara uses the medium as a tool of survival: death is incessantly evoked in words but not shown. In a recently published text, the collective laments the influence of a media industry that propagates photographs and videos of persons reduced to “bare life.”51 These images, they remind us, objectify the indignities of war and deny Syrians any capacity to resist or alter the “reality” imposed on them:

The persons whose humanity is suppressed in images from wars, mass violations of human rights and other sim-
liar situations are not allowed to speak. Their humanity stops at the rights of bystanders to freedom of expression. You can have the dignity of a person or be a victim, but you are not allowed to be both; most importantly, you are not legally allowed to choose what you want to be. Your wounds can speak, but you cannot.52

In contrast to the mute victims seen in the media, the sub-
jects who appear in Abounaddara’s films use language to affirm their existence. “Death is so ubiquitous that we cling to life even more,” reveals a Syrian exile in the three-minute
Still from Abounaddara's In the Name of the Father (2013).

I want to reach dad, to topple him...


In the team, there are opponents and supporters of the regime.
testimony in Confession of a Woman (2014). Emergency cinema does not seek to give a voice to the oppressed or document their suffering. Rather, it powerfully insists on the individual’s right to a dignified image. For Abounaddara, this is not a first-world privilege but a universal human right.

Shot mostly within domestic spaces and with tightly framed close-ups on the face, these videos have been described as portraits. They are in this sense an inverse of the earlier videos of crowded bodies moving through the streets of Syrian cities. It would seem as though these subjects have retreated to the private sphere as the Syrian war has intensified and the possibilities for a form of counter-speech have closed down. Yet I want to suggest that Abounaddara’s portraiture is actually premised on a profoundly political focus on embodied presence. It is not only the close-ups that insist on corporeality but also the content of many of the videos. The Lady of Syria, Part 1 (2014), for example, features a beautician educating a group of young women in the quotidian arts of styling hair without electricity or beauty products. The video is about the shaping of the self, but it is also full of bodies that are seen enacting another form of collective manifestation: the woman walks barefoot through her village, as shells fall in the surrounding fields, and the densely crowded room of girls listen intently to the woman’s lesson.

In filming kidnappings and mass shootings, Syrian citizens have defied a regime that has sought to physically and symbolically annihilate its opponents by removing all traces of their existence. The sniper in Homs aims not only to murder the young man who dares to film him but also to “kill the images” that are recorded on his cell phone. It could be countered that the pixelated images haphazardly captured by the mobile phone camera in Homs have the effect of transforming the chaos of an event into an abstraction. Such is the conclusion that Mroué invites audiences to make at the end of his performance, when he attempts to zoom in and identify the sniper. Instead of providing clarity or detail, the enlargement of each frame seems to take the viewer further away from the real; in Mroué’s terms, the video becomes paradigmatic of the loss of certainty associated with post-indexical media. Yet videos recorded on cell phone cameras do possess a physical immediacy that complicates the prevailing tendency to view digital images as disembodied and disconnected from any referent.

The Homs video ends with what may be the man’s final words, although the viewer does not (and cannot) know if he lives or dies. The actual shooting may take place off-camera, yet the shaking of the handheld camera indexes affective processes that take place independently of conscious control or intended meaning. The use of the cell phone as a tool of witnessing raises new possibilities for a kind of posthumous address to the living.

Notes

1. Much of the technical equipment—spycams, cell phones, laptops, and encryption software—used by citizen journalists was supplied by the Local Coordinating Committees that sprang up in cities and towns across Syria within a few months of the uprising. For more on this, see Malu Halasi, “Mystery Shopper: Interview with Assaad al-Achi,” in Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline, ed. Malu Halasi and Zaher Omareen (London: Saqi Books, 2014), 104–11.

10. To their credit, Kunstman and Stein briefly acknowledge that practices of digital suspicion marked by a perceived loss of solid or verifiable facts “can lead to paralysis and withdrawal from on-line political theaters altogether.” Kunstman and Stein, “Digital Suspicion.”
12. This is a common practice among Syrian demonstrators who wanted to ensure that their videos would be linked back to the specific event captured on their camera.
15. In the first months of the uprisings, government authorities began pre-emptively taking down presidential monuments in areas where they were likely to incite iconoclastic attacks. One video dated June 10, 2011, secretly records a group of men removing a giant statue of Hafez al-Assad from one of the main public squares in Hama. Thus, while the regime continued to present an image of normality in the
media, its material symbols of authority were being transformed into liabilities. See Anashanamer, “The Removal of the Statue of the Buried [meaning "the Cursed"] One. God Bless Him from Hama. 10/6/2011,” filmed June 2011, YouTube video, 02:16, posted June 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSrpsQIoOc
19. The Syrian film collective Abounaddara have been highly critical of the ways in which television networks have encouraged activists to sell their footage sourced directly from the street: “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 so doing, 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.” Cécile Boëx, “Emergency Cinema: An Interview with Syrian Collective Abounaddara,” trans. Susannah Dale, October 5, 2012, www.booksandideas.net/Emergency-Cinema.html
20. This clip is included in a television episode of the BBC One series Panorama entitled “Syria: Inside the Secret Revolution,” which aired on September 26, 2011.
22. Ibid., 31.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 26.
28. Ibid., 31.
29. Ibid., 35.
33. Mohammed’s first full-length feature film, Stars in Broad Daylight (1988), was widely interpreted as a thinly veiled critique of the regime’s corruption, brutality, and its more subtle techniques of domination. At the center of the narrative is Khalil, the ruthless patriarch of an ‘Alawi family who uses his job in a telephone company to listen in on the calls of his siblings. Khalil is played by the actor and director Abd al-Latif Abd al-Hamid, who bears a striking resemblance to Hafiz al-Assad. Stars was the subject of years of negotiation between Mohammed and government censors. While this work was not outright banned by the state, it was denied general release, placing it in an ambiguous limbo state between official approval and outright censorship. In a profile on Mohammed that appeared in the New Yorker in 2006, Ibrahim Hamidi, the Damascus bureau chief for the pan-Arab newspaper Al Hayat, described the system of repressive tolerance in the following terms: “By permitting Osama Mohammed and others to make movies financed by the government, the regime is harming the filmmakers’ credibility, and also trying to contain them. The films get awards abroad, which is good P.R. for the regime. At the same time, Syrians aren’t allowed to see the movies.” See Lawrence Wright, “Captured on Film,” New Yorker, May 15, 2006.
38. Douma, a working-class city nine kilometers northeast of Damascus, was one of the important flashpoints of the 2011 uprisings. Since that time the city has been the scene of bloody battles between regime forces and the Syrian Free Army (FSA).
39. After the emergence of armed resistance, many of the uprising’s initially de facto nonviolent protesters became FSA fighters. A significant cohort of the initiators and activists of nonviolent resistance are imprisoned. A number of nonviolent activists have been killed by the regime, or are among the displaced and refugees, or have been forced into hiding, moving from safehouse to safehouse to avoid arrest, their work hampered by limited mobility. Many venues for nonviolent activism, including demonstrations, are now closed off by conflict zones. The recent U.S. missile strikes on al-Shayrat airfield following yet another round of chemical attacks on the civilian population have done little to build international pressure on the Assad regime, which continues to receive crucial backing from Russia and Iran.
40. An article published in Al-Hayat describes a news report that appeared on one of the Arab satellite television stations. It shows footage of a Syrian youth being shot and killed while filming a protest with his cell phone. Although the footage from his phone ends after he drops his phone, the report includes a follow-up scene: video shot by the companions of the protester which shows them trying to save him. At one point, the cameraman focuses on the phone of the wounded
youth that is lying on the ground next to the body of the slain youth. See Abdo Wazzan, “Mashhadiyät Sūriyā” [Vignettes from Syria], Al-Hayat, March 26, 2012.

41. The project name (which translates to "the man with glasses") alludes to Dziga Vertov’s Man with a Movie Camera (1929).


44. Abounaddara, My Name Is Bashar, https://vimeo.com/145617041


47. Abounaddara, In the Name of the Father, May 24, 2013, https://vimeo.com/66891077


