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Film and Video as a Space for Political Expression and Social Critique in Syria

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Abstract

This article discusses examples of transgressive artistic production in Syria with a focus on moving images. During the 2000s, a young generation of artists began to experiment with digital video and rethink the role of the artist in society. They sought to develop new aesthetic languages and modes of representation. By examining this production in relation to critical and committed works by earlier generations of artists and filmmakers in Syria, I discuss the possibilities and limits of critical art production in the context of the authoritarian Syrian state.

Résumé

Cet article présente quelques exemples de production artistique transgressive en Syrie et met l'accent sur les images en mouvement. Au cours des années 2000, une nouvelle génération d'artistes commence à expérimenter avec la vidéo numérique et à repenser le rôle de l'artiste dans la société, en cherchant à développer des langages esthétiques et modes de représentation nouveaux. En comparant cette production à des œuvres critiques et engagées d'artistes et de cinéastes syriens des générations précédentes, je discute des possibilités et des limites d'une production d'art critique dans le contexte de l'Etat autoritaire syrien.

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Introduction*

Speaking about an early period of Syria's state institution of film production, *Al-mu'assassa al-'amma li-l-sinema* (National Film Organization, henceforth NFO), in the 1970s, the Syrian documentary filmmaker Omar Amiralay said in 2006:

It was chaotic. Syrian cinema had nothing, no infrastructure, no past. We established the foundations of Syrian cinema. We managed with the means we had at our disposal. The beginning of the 1970s was a true golden age. There was an incredible excitement. They [the people in charge of the NFO] not only gave the Syrians a chance, it was extraordinary, there was openness, they also gave other Arab filmmakers a chance. If it had continued like that, we could have created interesting things. There was a variety of experiments, of projects.¹

His words testify to a belief in a state organization's potential to further the arts and to allow for aesthetic experiments. In the 1970s, it illustrates, there had been hopes - also among intellectuals - that the new leadership would bring progress to the country. The year 1970 had seen a coup which brought the minister of defense, Hafez al-Assad to power. This so-called "Corrective Movement" put an end to inner-party fighting and ushered in certain reforms and a turn away from the previous revolutionary stance of the Ba'ath party towards economic stability and a moderate opening of the press landscape (which nevertheless remained firmly controlled by the Ministry of Information).²

The hopeful stance referred to by Omar Amiralay is illustrated in his documentary *Film muhawalah 'an sadd al-Furat* (*Film Essay on the Euphrates Dam*, 1970, 13 min), a celebration of the construction of the Tabqa Dam, which was intended to bring prosperity to the hitherto severely neglected eastern provinces of the country. However, Amiralay soon revised his optimistic view and

denounced the party and its functionaries in the film's sequels, *Al-hayat al-yawmiyya fi qarya suriyya* (*Everyday Life in a Syrian Village*, 1974, 90 min) and the much later *Tufan fi bilad al-Ba'ath* (*A Flood in Baath Country*, 2003, 47 min). Only four years lie between the celebratory *Film Essay* and *Everyday Life*, but in this brief period, Amiralay's and his fellow filmmakers' hopes for the state's cultural and developmental projects had been severely shattered. The climate of encouragement towards experimental film projects had given way to conformity, when the NFO had come under a new leadership in 1973. The days of free-spirited experimentation were over and some of the more free-spirited filmmakers left the organization.³

For visual artists, filmmakers, writers and other cultural producers, creating work within the frame of the authoritarian Ba'athist Syrian state came to entail a difficult balancing act between resignation faced with a climate of coercion and censorship on one hand and hopes for whatever small change might happen on the other. This situation continued with varying degrees of severity until the upheavals of 2011 ushered in an entirely new situation. Artistic and creative production became a valuable space for political contestation and for expressing dissent, while openly political discourse remained impossible. As political scientist Lisa Wedeen has argued, political resistance in Syria under Hafez al-Assad took on the form of what she calls "mundane transgressions" through films, cartoons and satire, serving as a substitute for direct political engagement.⁴

Critical artists and filmmakers were constantly at risk of being co-opted by the state. As noted by literary scholar miriam cooke, the authoritarian state sought to appropriate messages that proposed an alternative to state ideology in order to create its own cultural capital. Thus, artists were forced to find a way to produce their art that would

* This article is a summary of my PhD dissertation, which formed part of the research project "Other Modernities: Patrimony and Practices of Visual Expression Outside the West", funded by the Swiss National Science Fund.

¹ Cecile Boëx. "La contestation médiatisée par le monde de l'art en contexte autoritaire. L'expérience cinématographique en Syrie au sein de l'Organisme général du cinéma 1964 - 2010" (PhD dissertation, Université Aix en Provence, 2011), 115 - 116. The translation is mine.

² The Syrian Ba'ath party had been in power since 1963. For basic information about the "Corrective Movement" of Hafez al-Assad, see e.g. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1999), 8, and Salam Kawakibi, "The Private Media in Syria", Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia 11 (July 2010): 2, accessed September 2, 2019 <http://www.bihalex.org/search4dev/files/351189/183552.pdf>.

³ Boëx. "La contestation médiatisée", 77-79, 85.

⁴ Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 87, 131.

allow them to challenge the state and its institutions, while avoiding repercussions and appropriation of their work. Further complicating the matter was artists' dependence on state structures in order to produce and present work. Artists and the state were entangled in a web of mutual need and attempts to take advantage of the other. The state controlled and needed "its" artists to legitimate its power, and the artists needed the infrastructure of the state to produce and present art, but were simultaneously subject to its control and, occasionally, violence.⁵

The 1980s and 1990s were particularly bleak and characterized by a climate in which "the prison of daily life overshadowed much of the culture."⁶ Writing in 1997, the filmmaker Nabil Maleh (1936 – 2016) presented a thoroughly depressing image of the state of art and culture in Syria and, more generally, in the Arab world. He deplored the lack of vision and program as well as the loss of daring aesthetics and the dominance of the market. But he also stated his belief in what he called an "explosion," which he saw as inevitable because "it is not possible for human beings to accept these living conditions for much longer."⁷

While an "explosion" was still far away, significant changes happened during the 2000s when Bashar al-Assad took over as president after his father, Hafez, although the initial hopes for greater openness and individual freedom were disappointed. Yet, throughout the decade, artists, among them many young artists who took up contemporary practices, attempted to advocate for social change and challenge political and cultural taboos through their work. In what follows, I will discuss examples of transgressive artistic production in Syria and how their producers regarded the role of artists and art in society. I will

focus on documentary video works produced by younger artists during the period immediately preceding the uprising-turned-war and discuss their links to earlier film production. With his understanding of documentary filmmaking as a personal, socially engaged practice critical of power structures, the aforementioned Omar Amiralay served as an important inspiration for this young generation, who sought to venture onto new terrain with their work. Art production in Syria has often adhered to different notions of artistic commitment and thus, these works can be seen as standing in a tradition of critical and committed work on the country.⁸ My discussion of the works is based on extensive conversations led with artists and cultural producers during the second part of the 2000s, a time where I lived partly in Syria or at least spent several months in the country each year to conduct research.

Negotiating Spaces for Free Thinking

In June 2000, the veteran president of the Syrian Arab Republic, Hafez al-Assad died and power was transferred to his son, Bashar.⁹ Much hope, from Syrians and non-Syrians alike, was connected to this young man, who, with his Western training as an ophthalmologist and affinity to new technology, appeared so different from the so-called "old guard" of his father's entourage. The first speeches of the new president seemed to corroborate this view, he spoke of "democratic thinking" and of the "principle of accepting the opinion of the other."¹⁰ Soon after, discussion groups and political salons were organized in the homes of prominent intellectuals, among them writers, artists and filmmakers. The protagonists of this "civil-society movement," also called the "Damascus Spring"

⁵ miriam cooke, *Dissident Syria. Making Oppositional Arts Official*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2007), 29–30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷ Nabil Maleh, "Scenes from Life and Cinema," In *Insights Into Syrian Cinema: Essays and Conversations with Contemporary Filmmakers*, ed. Rasha Salti (New York: Ratapallax Press 2006), 92, 94. The article is a translation of the earlier text that appeared in Arabic under the title *Mashahad min al-hayat wa-al-sinema*, published in *'Alam al-Fikr*, a journal of the Kuwait National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature in 1997.

⁸ For a discussion of notions of "commitment" and "criticality" in the context of art production in Syria, see Charlotte Bank, "Painting as Critique: Oil Painting as a Site for Social and Political Negotiation in Syria," In *Visual Modernity in the Arab World, Turkey*

and Iran: Reinroducing the 'Missing Modern', ed. Silvia Naef and Elahe Helbig, (*Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 70:4, 2016), 1285 – 1306 and Charlotte Bank, "Translating Commitment. Some Thoughts on Critical Artistic Production in the Arab World," In *Furthering, Nurturing and Futuring Global Art Histories?*, ed. Jelle Bouwhuis (*Kunstlicht* 39: 1, 2018), 35 – 42.

⁹ For details on the transition of power from Hafez al-Assad to his son, see Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: from 'Authoritarian Upgrading' to Revolution?", *International Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2012): 95 – 113 and Joshua Stacher, "Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria's Hereditary Succession", *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 2 (2011): 197 – 212.

¹⁰ Volker Perthes, *Syria Under Bashar Al-Assad. Modernization and the Limits of Change*, Adelphi Papers, (London: Oxford University Press for International Institute for Strategic Studies 2004), 13.

movement, began publishing open letters and opinion pieces calling for political reform in Lebanese papers. In September 2000, 99 intellectuals, artists and professionals signed and published a declaration calling for an end to the emergency law, which had been in place since the Ba'thist coup in 1963, the public pardoning of all political prisoners and the return of deportees and exiles, as well as the establishment of the rule of law and a free public life.¹¹

While the signatories were at first left undisturbed by the authorities and state-controlled media also began to participate in the debates, a crackdown on salons and forums was launched in February 2001 and prominent members of the civil-society movement were arrested and sentenced to imprisonment.¹² That the movement was doomed to be so short-lived has to do with the nature of intended reforms in Syria under Bashar al-Assad. Rather than deep-going changes towards democracy, it can be seen as a "modernization of authoritarianism," in which domestic stability and continuity in relation to Syria's regional position were given priority over far-reaching reforms towards political and economic liberalization. The reform team around the president generally adhered to a classic modernization theory: Political reforms were seen as premature as long as the population was poor and lacked education.¹³ In other words, a direct involvement of Syrian citizens in political life was not foreseen.

The short-lived nature of the civil-society movement notwithstanding, it offers an interesting example of the importance of artists' and intellectuals' civic engagement and commitment for political change in Syria, something that has been characteristic throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Artists in Syria have mostly regarded themselves as committed members of society. Since the early days of fine art practice in

the European modality through the engagement for the national cause in the early independence era and the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Syrian artists have sought to engage actively with their contemporary society and use their art to comment on a large variety of issues.¹⁴ But artists also had to be wary of having their work appropriated by the state. In 1965, the Directorate of Plastic Arts sought to take direct control over the work of artists and demanded that works submitted to Directorate's Autumn Exhibition correspond to the theme "national art." Some artists protested against such restrictions and succeeded in reversing the policy, but only after director Afif Bahnassi had asserted that rather than restricting artists, the demand sought to free them from commercial needs and allowed them to work outside the market system.¹⁵ When artists reacted spontaneously to the Syrian defeat in the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 and the loss of the Golan Heights to Israel by gathering at the Yusuf Al-Azmeh Square in central Damascus to express their horror at the war, the state's cultural institutions were also quick to follow up and sought to use artists' activism for their own ideological purposes. Thus, the Ministry of Culture organized several exhibitions that year with titles such as "Aggression" and "Mobilization."¹⁶

Writings by officials and critics affiliated with the Ba'th party in Syria demonstrate a belief in artists' duty to support their nation and a focus placed on content rather than on form and style. In their view, art should reflect the "difficult reality, social problems and the threat of the imperialist aggression" that the country was faced with.¹⁷ A similar notion of the role of artists and writers was described in a statement issued in 1978 by the Arab Writers' Union: "[Individual commitment] cannot be separated from commitment to one's country and society [...] the writers and artists who produce

¹¹ Ibid. See also Joe Pace and Joshua Landis, "The Syrian Opposition: The Struggle for Unity and Relevance, 2003 - 2008," in *Demystifying Syria*, ed. Fred H. Lawson (London: Saqi and London Middle East Institute SOAS 2012), 120 - 122. A translation of the statement can be found here: https://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0010_sdoc0927.htm, accessed 20 February 2019.

¹² For a timetable of events of the 'Damascus Spring' see Perthes, *Syria under Bashar Al-Assad*, 15-19.

¹³ Ibid., 11- 26.

¹⁴ For a discussion of an early "committed" Syrian artist, see Bank, "Painting as Critique".

¹⁵ Anneka Lenssen, "The Shape of the Support: Painting and Politics in Syria's Twentieth Century" (PhD dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2014), 282 - 283, 302.

¹⁶ Ibid., 321.

¹⁷ Afif Bahnassi: *Les styles de l'art contemporain en Syrie*, UNESCO: *Consultation collective sur les problèmes contemporains des arts arabes dans leurs relations socio-culturelles avec le monde arabe*, (Hammamet 1974), 21.

the greatest works are those who realize this link in its highest form. They are at once free and committed.”¹⁸

Many artists tried to resist by the limited means at their disposal. As the NFO developed into a conformist state institution after the change in leadership referred to above, a group of filmmakers including Omar Amiralay and Nabil Maleh re-organized the Ciné-club of Damascus, which had existed since 1952, as a space for critical discussions about cinema. Reluctant to give up their ideals of a radical, politically and socially committed cinema, they organized screenings of (mainly European) art house films, discussions and encounters with filmmakers, with the aim of stressing the interconnection of aesthetics and the social role of cinema. Throughout the 1970s with its rising political tensions due to the growth of groups oppositional to the regime, the Ciné-club developed into a space for activism against the regime and was eventually closed down by the authorities in 1982.¹⁹ However, in the 1980s and 1990s, a new wave of auteur cinema succeeded in reclaiming a critical role for film production, although filmmakers often had to go to great length to veil their critique behind metaphors and allegories, a feature that is common to artistic production in authoritarian contexts.²⁰

To understand the authoritarian Syrian state’s fear of art’s power to influence the public, it helps to take a brief look at other authoritarian contexts. In a study on the unofficial art scene in the Soviet Union, political sociologist Paul Sjeklocha and artist Igor Mead have discussed how authoritarian states seek to appropriate the artist’s creative gifts, regarding them as state property of some kind. The possession of artistic talent is thus seen as the possession of material which rightly belongs to the state.²¹ As a consequence, the state attempts to appropriate the works of artists, even if it is critical.

¹⁸ Hafez al-Assad wa-qadaya al-kitaba wa-al-kuttab (Hafez al-Assad and issues concerning writing and writers), Damascus: Arab Writers Union Publications 1978, cited in Cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 25.

¹⁹ Boëx, “La contestation”, 85.

²⁰ For the importance of metaphors and subtexts in Syrian film-making, see Wedeen, *Ambiguities*, 112 – 120 and Cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 109 – 110. The literature on artistic production in authoritarian contexts is vast, a good general discussion of the subject is Andrei Plesu, “Intellectual Life under Dictatorship”, *Representations* 49 (Winter 1995): 61 – 71.

In the case of Syria, miriam cooke has referred to this as “commissioned criticism,” defined as permitting and even funding the production of critical artworks that the state would later use for its own aims in order to create a democratic façade, especially for the benefit of observers outside the country.²² This practice led to the paradoxical situation of the state producing critical films of high artistic quality which would be sent to foreign festivals and earn high acclaim, but not be shown in Syria, or only on special occasions where a display of creative freedom was seen as appropriate.²³

As mentioned above, the 2000s brought new hopes for the situation to improve. The hopes for social and political change that led established artists and intellectuals to form the civil-society movement were shared by the young generation of artists. There was a widespread longing for less rigid censorship, for new forms of expression and an eagerness to re-think the role of artists in society and to find new ways to interact directly with audiences and society at large.²⁴ Adequate opportunities for exhibiting or screening works of contemporary art were very few indeed and although new representative spaces, such as film and art festivals and non-profit organizations were initiated during the decade and even some commercial galleries showed some interest in including less traditional art forms than the standard painting and drawing, opportunities for young artists and filmmakers remained few. The foreign cultural centers, especially the Centre Culturel Français and the Goethe Institut presented occasional programs where works by young Syrian artists were shown to audiences comprised of both Syrians and expatriate foreigners, but many works remained limited to restricted audiences.

²¹ Paul Sjeklocha and Igor Mead, *Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union*, (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press 1967), 61.

²² cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 72 - 77.

²³ Ibid., 118 – 120. See also Boëx, “The End of the State Monopoly over Culture: Toward the Commodification of Cultural and Artistic Production”, *Middle East Critique* 20, no. 2 (2011):144.

²⁴ This is a point that was mentioned to me by numerous young artists and is also corroborated by the risks many of them took in their work, as discussed below.

Challenging Taboos

While many young artists began to address a wide range of socio-cultural themes, such as the relationship between the individual and society or women's living conditions, some ventured onto the more fraught terrain of attempting to challenge political taboos. They were hoping to push the boundaries for permitted speech, as censorship was seemingly becoming less rigorously enforced than previously. For many young video-makers, the documentary filmmaker Omar Amiralay became an important influence due to his highly personal cinematic and critical stance vis-à-vis the Syrian regime. But if Amiralay had been able to produce films that openly challenged the state and its power structures (aided by his voluntary exile in France and international fame), young film- and video-makers often saw themselves confronted by the same rigid censorship as their older peers and several of their works were banned from being shown in the country. Accordingly, the young generation of artists and filmmakers were obliged to look for alternative ways to voice critique. Some adopted strategies similar to those of earlier generations' artists who resorted to allegories and metaphors, others turned to techniques such as fragmented storytelling or let their stories be told through the eyes of children or social outsiders. Reem Ali's *Foam* and Reem Al-Ghazzi's *Lights*, which I discuss below, are examples of how the point of view of children and social outsiders may be chosen when attempting to address controversial issues. However, in the case of *Foam*, the strategy did not prevent the work being banned in Syria.²⁵

Unlike earlier films, the videos of this young generation were produced outside the quasi-monopoly of the NFO.²⁶ The NFO was established in 1964 as a state institution under the Ministry of Culture to oversee and develop a "national cinema", but seems to have developed as a serious

institution for high-quality cinema in the 1970s only. After the brief period of free experimentation in the early 1970s that Omar Amiralay reminisced about almost nostalgically, conditions of production and censorship grew continuously harsher. While auteur cinema flourished in the 1980s and 1990s and freedom from market constraints allowed for great aesthetic complexity, filmmakers often had to enter lengthy negotiations with functionaries of the NFO in order to get the necessary permits and produce their films as they wanted them.²⁷ For the young videomakers I discuss here, producing their work within the framework of the NFO was not an option. In order to do this, filmmakers would have to become a state employee and often wait many years before being able to realize their projects. Many young videomakers did not study film, but were graduates from the Institute of Dramatic Arts or the Faculty of Fine Art of the University of Damascus. Others were autodidacts or had studied other subjects. It is interesting to note, that Syria never had a film school of its own. Earlier generations of filmmakers had been able to profit from a system of state scholarships offered to talented young people to study cinema in the USSR.²⁸ But the young generation of videomakers was forced to seek training elsewhere, although opportunities were rare. Apart from basic courses in video technique at the Institute of Dramatic Arts, they mostly relied on occasional workshops offered by the foreign cultural institutes and self-training. Seeing the necessity of training opportunities for young Arab filmmakers, Omar Amiralay founded the Arab Institute of Film (AIF) in Amman in 2005 together with the Lebanese-American filmmaker Hisham Bizri, the Egyptian filmmaker Hala Galal and three teachers from the Danish National Film School, Jesper Højbjerg, Jakob Høgel and Anders Østergaard. Funded by the Danish NGO, IMS (International Media Support), it was supposed to become an MFA-granting institution by 2010, but

²⁵ I discuss other examples elsewhere, Charlotte Bank "Feminism and Social Critique in Syrian Contemporary Art", in *Under the Skin: Feminist Art from the Middle East and North Africa Today*, ed. Ceren Özpınar & Mary Kelly (Oxford: Proceedings of the British Academy), forthcoming and Charlotte Bank, *The Contemporary Art Scene in Syria: Social Critique and an Artistic Movement*, (London and New York: Routledge), forthcoming.

²⁶ While it was not impossible to produce films on a private basis, production was quite insignificant. It was only in the course of economic liberalization in the 1990s that private companies began to produce TV series (*musalsalat*), mainly for the market of Arab Gulf states. See Boëx, "The End of the State Monopoly", 145 - 146.

²⁷ For details on the history of the NFO: Ibid., 140 - 144.

²⁸ Ibid., 141.

was dismantled in 2008 and re-established in Beirut under the name of Screen Institute Beirut.²⁹ Two of the three works I discuss here were produced while the videomakers were students of the AIF: Reem Ali's *Foam* and Rami Farah's *Silence*.

Young artists who chose video as their medium did not always define their work according to a clear distinction between "film" and "video," but used the terms interchangeably. Their works are often located at the intersection of video art and documentary film. I have chosen to use the term "video" when discussing their works, as it reflects their chosen medium. In this context I find useful film theorist Laura U. Marks' definition of "video" as "independent work using the video medium that cannot be entirely subsumed under theatrical cinema, commercial television, or visual art."³⁰ In what follows, I will discuss three works produced during the 2000s that are of particular interest, as they attempt to articulate a clear critique of socio-political issues through a variety of means.

Alternative Historiographies

Balancing the wish to articulate critique of the social and political status quo with a felt necessity to have their voices heard, many young artists chose a cautious way of approaching their subject. One video, however, attempted to openly tackle an important taboo issue: Rami Farah's *Samt* (*Silence*, 2006, 40 min). The video revolves around the circumstances of the loss of Syria's Golan territory to Israel in 1967 and juxtaposes two different narratives: An official one told by a civil servant of the Ministry of Information and an unofficial account told through the recollections of an old inhabitant of Quneitra, the main town of the Syrian Golan. The loss of the Golan is highly sensitive due to the role of Hafez al-Assad—then minister of defense—in ordering the retreat of Syrian troops. Popular belief, represented here by the old man in Quneitra, holds that the Syrian army was ordered

to retreat at a moment when a Syrian victory was still possible.³¹ Farah presents the two diverging narratives in stark contrast. He follows the civil servant in his everyday surroundings at home and at work, thereby filming the office and corridors of the ministry with a crooked camera angle that underlines the atmosphere of secrecy. The civil servant talks about his dedication to "setting historical misconceptions right" through his work as host of a history program on TV and becomes upset at Farah's suggestions that the official version of the events of 1967 differs from that of popular memory. In the video, he comes across as rather unlikeable and his angry fanaticism stands in stark contrast to the old man's sorrowful recollection. However, at the very end of the video, his facade breaks down and he shows a more human face. On a trip to Quneitra, we learn that he is originally from this city and we see him break down upon receiving the news of the death of a relative. The video lays bare the false propaganda of Syrian officialdom and stresses that even those who are fully part of it are unable to uphold its assumptions when faced with reality. The video stirred the anger of censorship and has never been shown in Syria. However, it has been presented occasionally at international film festivals, exhibitions and film screenings with a Syrian focus.

Laura U. Marks has noted that certain films have the power to recreate "not the true historical event, but at least another version of it" through an examination of the discursive layers of the event.³² Rami Farah's video touches a highly sensitive issue of recent Syrian historiography and by questioning official narratives, he ventured onto dangerous terrain. The subject of the Golan and its loss may be said to be an important "no-go area" and only few artists have attempted to address it. Another example is Mohamad Malas' fiction film *Al-layl* (*The Night*, 1992, 116 min). The film is a highly complex work that links several sensitive themes and interweaves autobiographical material, regional

²⁹ Laura U. Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema. Affections for the Moving Image*, (Cambridge (MA) and London: The MIT Press, 2015), 42-43. The website of Screen Institute Beirut does not state this aspect of its history. <http://www.screeninstitutebeirut.org/about.html>, accessed September 2, 2019. None of the founders are members of its present board of governors.

³⁰ Laura U. Marks, "What Is That *and* between Arab Women and Video? The Case of Beirut," *Camera Obscura* 54, no. 18/3 (2003): 43.

³¹ cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 6.

³² Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2000), 29.

history and a deconstruction of pan-Arab ideology. Aesthetically sophisticated, it plays on several levels of memory, including what Malas himself refers to as “imagined or wished-for memory.”³³

Through the recollections of the film’s protagonist, it tells the story of his parents, their marriage in Quneitra and the disappearance of his father. A particular ambiguity as to which memories are real and which are the creations of the protagonist’s dreams prevails throughout the film. The figure of the protagonist’s father is connected to several delicate issues of recent Syrian history. A native of the city of Hama, he was on his way to join the revolt against the British in Palestine, and stopped in Quneitra together with other volunteers from Syria to rest. Here he was hastily married to the protagonist’s mother and it was in Quneitra that she waited with her son for the return of her husband and father of her child. The film thus links the towns of Hama and Quneitra with the Palestinian issue, an issue close to the heart of many Syrians and other Arabs. But this very issue also allowed for a freezing of active political life and the prolonged state of emergency in Syria.

The stagnation of oppositional political activities is closely linked to the history of the city of Hama. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood rose as the most serious challenge to the Ba’th regime. They launched a campaign of sabotage and violent mass demonstrations. After an attempt to assassinate the president in June 1980 failed, a massive crackdown on dissent followed, which culminated in the killing of thousands of Islamists in the city of Hama in February 1982, an operation which also led to sweeping destruction of the historic city.³⁴ Hama represents, just as the Golan, an important taboo and hardly any artists have dared address it. But in *The Night*, Malas takes on both issues in a form that he himself has referred to as being “not about memory. It is memory itself,”

a memory that “needs to be tested, to be put in the witness stand.”³⁵

The protagonist of the film wanders through the streets of Quneitra, through his own memories and through those of his mother, to find out the truth about his father’s fate. The film leaves many questions open and hardly answers any, but suggests the existence of multiple secrets. It thus creates an ambiguous space that allows for an interrogation of history, both the official version and that of personal recollections. This skepticism towards simplistic narratives of liberation and national greatness is linked to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s notion of “Post-Third Worldist” cinema. Such films

install doubt and crisis at the very core of the films. Rather than a grand anticolonial metanarrative, they favor heteroglossic proliferations of difference within polygeneric narratives, seen not as embodiments of a single truth but rather as energizing political and aesthetic forms of communitarian self-construction.³⁶

With *The Night*, Mohamad Malas casts doubts and makes suggestions. Shadows of waterwheels recall the metonym of the city of Hama (Hama is known for its ancient waterwheels), but later they turn out to be windmills. Yet, the suggestion has been made and the link between the two cities, destroyed either by direct actions of the state or the state’s inaction, was clear to critics and viewers of the film.³⁷ Works like *The Night* and *Silence* attempt to “destroy myths from the inside,” they expose the myth as fiction and hint at the state’s active role in its creation.³⁸ And this makes them dangerous for power and necessitates their ban. While *Silence* has never been shown in Syria, *The Night* has only been screened at very rare occasions, such as a special screening during the Damascus International Film Festival in 1995.³⁹

³³ Mohamad Malas (filmmaker) in conversation with the author, Berlin, October 2010.

³⁴ For an outline of these events, see Raymond Hinnebusch: *Syria. Revolution From Above*, (London and New York: Routledge 2001), 98 – 103.

³⁵ cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 113 - 114.

³⁶ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Robert, *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media*, (London and New York: Routledge 1994), 288. See also cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 113 – 114.

³⁷ Ibid., 114 – 115.

³⁸ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 66.

³⁹ cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 106.

Failed Reforms and Gender Relations in Rural Syria

During the latter part of the 2000s, a severe drought in the neglected eastern provinces of Syria aggravated the levels of poverty among the inhabitants.⁴⁰ In the early days of the Ba'ath regime, this region had been subject to several modernization programs aimed at improving its economic basis and living conditions. As mentioned above, Omar Amiralay had initially celebrated these efforts, only to become one of their most fierce critics. His films *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village*, *Al-dajaj (The Chicken, 1977, 40 min)* and the much later *A Flood in Baath Country* all represent powerful denouncements of the Ba'ath party's failed policies.

Poverty, gender relations and failed reforms in rural Syria were taken up by the young artist and filmmaker Reem Al-Ghazzi in her video *Adwa' (Lights, 2009, 23 min, Figures 1 - 3)*.⁴¹ It portrays a family in a remote village in the Jabal 'Arouda region and lets its members voice their daily grievances. Like many other families in the area, they had been displaced in the 1970s when the area was flooded after the construction of the Tabqa Dam as part of a large-scale plan to develop agriculture in the Euphrates Basin.⁴² But the video suggests that the opposite has been the result. The protagonists now live in a village with neither electricity nor proper roads, water for drinking and household purposes has to be fetched from the Assad Lake, which is polluted by the sewers of nearby towns and villages. The reality we see in the video stands in jarring contrast to the regime's official discourse of progress and development, the villagers' lives are filled with hard work and despair at failed promises by the authorities. As one of the villagers says, "we are exporting electricity to Lebanon and Jordan, but our village cannot get it from the power plant one kilometer away," concluding "the village is forgotten by time itself".

While all villagers work hard, Al-Ghazzi presents a world of strict gendered and age-related hierarchy. The boys find ways to combine work with play, the girls however, appear constantly occupied with household work. While the men do very specific work, the women's work includes fishing, tending to animals (chicken and sheep), carrying water, washing, baking bread, cooking and cleaning. Critical questions posed by Al-Ghazzi about the distribution of work are met by the men with seemingly rational answers, stressing the necessity to work together as a family: "...if you have wives, then they'll work with you. If you have daughters, they'll help you. But if you have neither of them, then you have to work alone." Also the boys have very clear ideas on the distribution of work: "men work in fishing, or in Damascus or in Jordan. Women work cleaning bathrooms, cleaning toilets, sweeping the yards." Each person has a very clear position in this society and there is no room for transgression.

Despite these undeniable tensions, the protagonists present a tight-knit family unit, held together by the daily struggle, and by depending and relying on each other. As spectators, we are given intimate views of their life. We see them sharing meals, talking and joking, yet worries are never far off. Poverty, but also rigid morals stand in the way of a better future for the children. The school is far away and for the daughter of the family, as for other girls in the village, education automatically stops after the sixth grade, as any school offering further education is located so far away that the families will not let them go. There is little time for studying; everybody in the family has to do his or her share of the work. Homework is done at night by the light of a gas lamp. All of this makes any hope for future improvement slim; for the children, the most likely outcome is that they continue to live their lives just like their parents before them, even if the mother would want it to be different.

⁴⁰ Francesca De Chatel, "The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution", *Middle Eastern Studies* 50:4 (2014): 1 - 5.

⁴¹ The video can be accessed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbwI0jpiHAc>. Accessed September 2, 2019.

⁴² Robert Springbord, "Baathism in Practice: Agriculture, Politics, and Political Culture in Syria and Iraq", *Middle Eastern Studies* 17, no. 2 (1981): 192.





Figures 1-3. Reem Al-Ghazzi, *Lights*, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

Lights brings to life a world unknown to most people, including many urban Syrians: the world of the country's remote rural areas. With its focus on rural poverty and its resulting hopelessness it stands in the tradition of the mentioned films by Omar Amiralay with their critique of the government's misguided developmental measures. In its examination of the family unit as a model for the state's power structures it shows parallels to Oussama Mohammad's films *Khutwa khutwa* (*Step by Step*, 1979, 23 min), *Nujum al-nahar* (*Stars in Broad Daylight*, 1988, 105 min) and *Sunduq al-dunya* (*Sacrifices*, 2002, 113 min). In all these films, the hierarchy inside the families serves as a metaphor for state power and its abuse in the Syrian state.

Navigating Oppression

Another instance of abuse of state power and its cost for Syrian citizens is addressed in a documentary video by Reem Ali, *Zabad* (*Foam*, 2008, 46 min, Figures 4 - 5). It portrays the daily life of a Syrian family, one of whose members suffers from a mental illness. While the family members are shown pursuing various household tasks and enjoying leisure time together, sinister details of the past slowly surface: the husband and wife, both communists, share a history of political imprisonment. Memories of their past and their current feelings of despair and disillusionment interrupt their seemingly calm family life and dedicated social activism. While they dream of leaving Syria, this is complicated by their concerns about the wife's brother Muhammad, who suffers from schizophrenia and who would need to be taken care of. Muhammad plays a key role in the video.



Figure 4-5. Reem Ali, *Foam*, 2008, photographer: Jack Hagop Kirkorian.

As his illness gives him a certain “jester’s privilege,” he functions as a mediator between the spectators, the filmmaker and the other protagonists. He blurts out uncomfortable truths about his sister Asmahan’s political affiliations, something that would normally be left unmentioned, and questions the couple about their fantasies of flight and dreams of starting a new life elsewhere in freedom. Throughout the video, it is clear that although Asmahan and her husband Ali are clearly a loving couple, they both suffer from the tensions of living in Syria with its oppressive political climate, and this continues to threaten their chances for happiness. It is up to the mentally inflicted Muhammad to tell the truth about life in Syria. The Syrian censorship authorities appear to have been so disturbed by this video, that they not only banned it from being screened in Syria, but also tried to intervene against its presentation during the Carthage Film Festival in Tunisia in 2009.⁴³ As in Reem Al-Ghazzi’s *Lights*, *Foam* gives a voice to a marginalized person. Allowing uncomfortable truths to be told by persons of lesser responsibility, children or a mentally inflicted man allows for suggestions rather than hard facts. It opens up possibilities for narratives that are located outside of official discourse. In authoritarian states and dictatorships such works may point to facts that the regimes of such states seek to ignore or deny the existence of and thereby allow for the presentation of other realities, outside official knowledge.⁴⁴

Challenges since 2011

The films and videos discussed above represent examples of how artists and filmmakers have attempted to challenge the power structures of the Syrian authoritarian state and question its narratives. Thereby, the works have made use of

various means in order to articulate critique, such as metaphorical language, hinting at critical meaning rather than outright criticism, or stories have been told by social outsiders. But as the example of Reem Ali’s *Foam* shows, these careful approaches did not always hinder works being banned.

When comparing the work produced during the 2000s with the production after 2011 and the beginning of the Syrian uprising important differences appear. As the level of violence grew throughout the first year of the conflict, works began to appear online that were openly critical of the brutality with which the protests were met by the forces of order. But the openness, with which artists denounced the regime came at a price: In order to circumvent repercussions (several artists and their families had been beaten up and tortured due to their critical work), artists began producing work anonymously or as part of collectives.⁴⁵

In the early stages, it was mainly expressions of support for the peaceful protestors and criticism of regime violence that were at the center of artists’ concerns. Later, as the conflict turned into down-right war and many Syrians, artists and ordinary citizens, were forced to leave the country, themes of flight, loss and exile took over in importance. Numerous works deal with the trauma of losing one’s home and loved ones, of struggling with the feelings of disempowerment faced with the terrors of war.⁴⁶ In the past few years, such works have increasingly found their way onto the international art scene, in part due to Syria’s regular presence in the news, but also due to the fact that many Syrian artists have been forced to re-locate to other countries recently, as living conditions deteriorated in Syria and are now integrating into the art scenes of their new places of residence.⁴⁷

⁴³ Reem Ali, personal statement during a Q&A session with the author at a screening at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, February 2012.

⁴⁴ See Caterina Preda, “Artistic Critiques of Modern Dictatorships”, *The European Legacy* 17, no. 7 (2012): 901.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of anonymity as a strategy for artistic production in the first year of the Syrian uprising, see Charlotte Bank: “Calling Things by Their Real Names: Anonymity and Artistic Online Production During the Syrian Uprising”, *Fusion Journal* 9 (2016) <http://www.fusion-journal.com/issue/009-anonymous-the-void-in-visual-culture/calling-things-by-their-real-names-anonymity-and-artistic-online-production-during-the-syrian-uprising/>

⁴⁶ For a discussion of works by displaced Syrian artists in Berlin, see Charlotte Bank: “Remaking a World: Recently Displaced Artists from Syria in Berlin”, in: Johanna Rolshoven and Joachim Schlör (eds.), *Artistic Positions and Representations of Mobility and Migration, Mobile Cultures Studies* 4 (2018): 171 – 182.

⁴⁷ To get an idea of the dispersion of artists from Syria, see this (uncomplete) map published by *The New Yorker* in January 2018: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/mapping-the-journeys-of-syrias-artists>, accessed 10 January 2019. It should be noted, however, that the map is incomplete, as it does not list all countries, where artists have found refuge.

While the interest with which the work of Syrian artists is met is welcomed and facilitates the artists' continued professional existence, it also presents a number of challenges.⁴⁸ As is the case with many non-Western artists, Syrian artists are often expected to conform to a particular notion of their cultural identity and called upon to "explain" social and political conditions of their countries of origin to Western audiences through their work. Switching the focus from artistic and aesthetic considerations to educational ones often means that the subtleties inherent in the works are lost.⁴⁹ Subsequently, artists may wish to counter such essentializations, present a different image of their home country and thereby narrow the thematic scope of their work. As new arrivals, artists may profit from actively engaging with such expectations, as it can offer them opportunities to exhibit their work and participate otherwise in artistic activities. But, in order to secure a future as professional artists, they are also facing the need to find ways to steer free of exploitation, of being swallowed up by a fetishization of "war art" and being rapidly forgotten as soon as the interest in "Syrian art" fades away. Balancing these concerns while continuing to develop their individual artistic practice is the great challenge facing Syrian artists in their different locations at present.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to briefly sketch out a number of issues related to artistic commitment and critique in the context of authoritarian Syria under the rule of the Ba'th party from the 1970s till the present. I have focused on documentary works produced by young videomakers during the 2000s and discussed their links with earlier examples of socially committed auteur cinema. The brief period in the history of art in Syria represented by the 2000s was a time of experimentation and important changes where young artists took up new forms of expression and sought new ways to

engage with their audiences. While the promises of this decade were crushed when the uprising began in early 2011 and quickly developed into a violent war, it is a period that remains important due to its transitional role. It was characterized by a breaking free from rigid aesthetics that had arguably guided much of Syrian art up to that point and experimentation with contemporary artistic media like video, installation and performance, practices which have greatly gained in importance since the beginning of the uprising.

Artistic production of the 2000s period has not received much scholarly attention, in contrast to the years that followed the beginning of the Syrian uprising and is at risk of falling into oblivion. Yet, any attempt to reach an in-depth understanding of Syrian artistic production (or that of Syrian artists having relocated to other countries) since 2011 will need to consider the developments of the ten preceding years. The ease with which artists turned their attention to new technology and to the internet as a space for both dissemination and discussion of art after the beginning of the uprising is hard to imagine without the groundwork laid during the earlier decade.

⁴⁸ Bank, "Remaking a World", 179 – 180.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the reception of works by Iraqi artists in the West, see Silvia Naef, "Not Just 'For Art's Sake': Exhibiting Iraqi Art in the West After 2003," In *Writing the*

Modern History of Iraq. Historiographical and Political Challenges, ed. Jordi Tejel et al. (New Jersey, London, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2015), 487 – 489.