



# **Arab Cinema in the 21st Century: Digital Media, Collectivism and the Subjective Documentary Form**

**Viola Shafik**

**Background paper to the Fourth Arab Social Science Report  
August 2022**



**Issued by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences**

Alamuddin Building, 2nd Floor  
John Kennedy Street, Ras Beirut  
Beirut, Lebanon

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When inviting me to contribute to this volume, Hoda Esadda was kind enough to share two hypotheses as points of departures, first to look at films as very important contributions to our knowledge about the world, the transformations, and as producers of new ideas and sensibilities“, and second, that 2011 has been transformational on many levels and has inspired new understandings of the world and the self“. And indeed both topics prove to be challenging assumptions because even though their answers may seem obvious at first, they offer much space for controversy at second sight.

To begin with, we will want to ask whether the Arab uprisings 2010/11 (the first wave of protests started in Tunisia on December 17, 2010) may be indeed seen as transformative and in which respect. Doubtless, since then the revolt has triggered immense changes. Sweeping away the old guard of dictators it has aggravated the regions social grievances in an unforeseen and unwanted manner, even when disregarding its worst aftereffects, such as the militant struggles in Libya, Yemen and Syria. At the same time, analysts found that the revolts were preceded by signs of an augmenting mobilization and change quite some time before the actual outbreak of which the 2008 Mahalla strikes in Egypt and the Phosphate Triangle protests in Tunisia were only one tip of the iceberg (Bayat, 2017; Hussein, 2019; de Smet, 2015). Plus, the uprisings formed part of a string of more contemporary and self-declared „revolutions“ in the region, starting with massive protests in Lebanon in 2005 up to the latest wave in 2019, the Hirak in Algeria and the Sudanese revolution in the same year.

Similarly, considering 2010/11 a hotbed of new understandings with regards to Arab cinema we might seem to suggest a „turn“ based view of history which would be doubtless in need of qualification. First, I hold that the introduction of digital technology, new media and an Arab trans-regional funding system which began to gradually make headways in the early 1990s had the more groundbreaking effect on changing the film-producing and distributing landscape (cf. Marks, 2015; Shafik, 2016). It fostered independent and collaborative filmmaking, the further spread of films from the region in the international arthouse circuits and an immense diversification in film esthetics and styles, including the documentary form. This is not to say, that the immediate events were not represented on the screen or had no additional repercussion on production frameworks or on film esthetics. Yet, without the new technology the cinematic testimonies would have never been as numerous and as intense as they became in these years, nor would have the experimentation with different formats and narrative and non-narrative forms as varied. Having said this, I propose to widen our temporal lens through which we identify trends and novelties, that is an increasing subjectivity, changed esthetics, new formats and outlets for regional cinema to encompass the last three decades.

Second, we will definitely want to ask what kind of knowledge films produce and how. Needless to say that there is no way to separate this production and its contents from different ways of film and media reception be it on the level of consumption, esthetic criticism or theoretical analysis. In fact, these modes of spectatorship often end up in contradictory or hardly related discourses on film for the simple reason of being produced by often totally disconnected circuits, such as academia, film professionals and individual consumers; a matter that illuminates in turn the transiency of any knowledge production including the one offered by this very text. Little wonder then that until the 1970s - apart from the structural (economy) based film studies - particularly feminist and social sciences inspired analyses were caught in a sort of mirror theory which assumed too easily that film narratives, particularly those considered realist or documentary „reflected“ society directly. These perspectives meanwhile have been shaken deeply by new methodologies drawing from disciplines as different as psychology, structuralism, discourse theory, cultural, post-colonial and queer studies. Moreover, one of the constant challenges for any analysis have emerged from the fact that film as an art exists at the fringes of two historically grown, antithetically perceived ways of knowledge production, namely science and poetic writing, a schism that reverberates in the more than questionable distinction between fiction and non-fiction.

Culture and film theorists have been grappling ever since with the question in how to classify fiction and documentation with regards to their esthetic approaches to reality. Bill Nichols, for instance, in reversing the usual distinction between fiction and non-fiction suggested to perceive all films as documentaries, the ones „of wish-fulfillment“ (fiction) and those of „social representation“ (non-fiction) (Nichols, 2001: 1). Clearly this suggestion has its limitations, historically as well as esthetically. For social representation is the main concern of numerous fiction films as well, particularly those with a realist or naturalist orientation. In contrast, an increasing number of non-fiction films attempts to encompass the psychological and the imaginary hereby bridging and merging these two originally non-existing poles. In fact, the etymological roots of poetry is the Greek „poiesis“, means literally „to make“ or to bring something into existence that did not exist before. As Michael Renov argues in his discussion of the poetics of documentary it denoted also an „active making“ and was thus „couched in the active mood of scientific inquiry in the way it addressed the aesthetic domain with an epistemological urgency“ (Renov, 1993: 16). Jacques Rancière too deconstructed our basic understanding of documentary in turning back to Antiquity. He suggested an analogy between the relation of politics, language and documentary in conjuring the two opposed strategies of patricians and plebeians, „that of the patricians - or the disciplines - which is interested in relegating everything to its place, i.e. fix it, archive it, and the other that subverts that fixation in a fictionalizing, ambiguity and obscurity producing movement“ (Muhle, 2016: 65). The latter is what in its core I understand as subjectivity in the arts.

During the last three decades, just like in the theories of revolution, subjectivity has moved into the center of attention for being an increasingly important device for cinematic expression. With regards to the documentary form for instance it is believed to have made its breakthrough - at least in the capitalist societies - at a moment when „the politics of class shifted to the identity politics and social movements following the feminist turn of the 70s“ (Chanan, 2007: 242). Yet, Renate Wöhrer warned that subjectivity cannot be thought and imagined without objectivity as its supposed opposite (Wöhrer, 2016: 55). Both have been standing in a hierarchic relation whereby subjectivity has been often constructed as a contamination of objectivity that is based on a historically grown dualism (Renov, 2004: 173p). This has been facilitated through the technical potential of the medium with regards to mechanically produced movement and optical perception, an aspect which became connected particularly in non-fiction film to the factual recording as well as to the production of evidence and truth (Renov 2004: 173; Wöhrer 2016: 46pp).

In the region, like elsewhere the various facets of „subjective“ formats have expanded immensely since the introduction of digital technology, from auto-biographies, personal diaries, first-person narrations, docudramas up to other forms which basically rely on performativity, self-reflexivity and self-representation, something that has pushed the international festival jargon towards using the term „documentary form“ instead of documentary. Clearly this new form enjoys an increasing popularity among „creative“ filmmakers originating from Arab countries as well. As for narrative cinema, here too experimentation with structures and esthetics has risen to include borderline formats such as fantasy, fake documentary or mockumentary. Yet, the crucial issue here is that as opposed to film industrial products the independent fiction and new documentary forms have been flourishing since the turn of the millennium in the largely parallel and of course less profitable and less mainstream oriented circuits, i.e. VOD, arthouse and festivals and have been far less circulated on television or international streaming channels like Amazon and Netflix.

Now, how can we describe and understand this technological shift and in which ways did it influence film esthetics and the choice of formats? Generally filmmaking once and still does represent a highly expensive enterprise for many reasons, one of them was formerly related to the technically complicated processes of developing and editing analog film stock as well as the use of highly expensive devices. This used to make it very difficult for individuals to venture into the field and produce independently. The usually less cost-intensive non-fiction sector suffered from similar

constraints. However, starting from the 1960s documentary film technology shifted slowly but surely from the use of 35 and 16 mm celluloid - filmed with devices which until the 1960s were not even portable and where sound and image were still dissociated during recording - to the synchronous electronic analog medium (video) anticipating eventually the even more convenient non-linear light digital technology in the 1990s. The latter revolutionized accessibility and affordability of the medium decisively changing herewith the framing professional and economic conditions of independent filmmaking, particularly in the field of documentary and experimental filmmaking. In a lesser degree it affected also the economy of fiction film production. Essentially, it started offering filmmakers in the global, less affluent South including most of the Arab countries an opportunity for individual audio-visual experimentation temporarily and partially shielded from state or other institutionalized local or international forms of intervention. Yet of course, since then artists on the one hand and markets as well as authorities on the other have been engaged in a constant hide-and-seek game - restrictions and its circumvention; one of which is Egypt's most recent ban on unlicensed public photographing and shooting - an even more absurd measure vis à vis the millions of cell phones equipped with cameras circulating the country.

In terms of political and esthetic orientation: Around the turn of the millennium in almost all Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, the introduction of digital technology, supported by online editing devices compatible with regular PCs, got associated with a new generation of independent, avantgardist, 'secessionist,' or simply critical currents. Haifa' Mansur's documentary, *Women without Shadow* (Nisa' bila zill, 2005), on women's rights and position in Saudi Arabia is one example. Her own camerawoman, Mansur toured the country seeking to determine the status of women today in her homeland. In Kuwait, the full-length *Cool Youth* (Shabab cool, 2004) by television director Muhammad Dahham al-Shammari was shot on digital and then transferred to 35mm for screenings in commercial theaters. The same applies to *Midnight* (Muntasaf al-layl, 2004) by Abd Allah al-Salman. In Bahrain, Bassam al-Thawadi (al-Dhawadi), director of the country's first full-length feature film, had chosen the same medium already by 2003 for his second film, *The Visitor* (al-Za'ir). Also, more than one film director from 'elder' film countries, like Egypt and Syria, has turned to digital video for feature film shooting as a means either to save production costs or to create new aesthetics and a genuine film style. One example is Yousry Nasrallah, director of *The City* (al-Madina, 1999), who wanted to give his actors more space for improvisation.

An important reason for the increasing use of digital video was economic as well. Mohamed Khan's self-produced *Klephty* (2004) offered the director an opportunity to return to his earlier observative, socially committed realism. The medium revolutionized likewise documentary filmmaking and offered it a hitherto unknown space of independence that reflected even back on moviegoing culture, just to name Amir Ramses' *Jews of Egypt* (An yahud Misr, 2012), one of the first Egyptian full length documentaries to achieve a release in a commercial cinema. A few years earlier, Nadia Kamel's very personal documentary *Egyptian Salad* (Salata baladi) was facilitated by the use of the new technology that allowed her to shoot herself within the intimate space of her family. Naturally her reflections on the multi-cultural background of her family including the Jewish roots of her mother created a stir. In Syria too Muhammad Malas, encouraged by foreign funding, took for the first time the opportunity to realize a feature, *Passion* (Bab al-Maqam, 2005), without the support of the Syrian National Film Organization. Likewise Moroccan filmmakers Nabil Ayouch, Abdelkader Lagtaa and Mohamed Ben Abderrahmane Tazi turned to the digital format in 2003 (Dwyer, 2004: 32). Meanwhile the use of digital cameras has replaced 35mm and 16mm in production and for film projection of all formats, even high budget fiction films.

Filmmakers and video artists interested in formal experiments have also emerged in the same period. Doubtless, Lebanon must be considered the vanguard in this respect. With the end of the war and the gradual return and/or coming of age of a younger generation, a vibrant independent and innovative

art and video film movement appeared (Marks, 2003). Akram Zaatari for instance directed more than thirty videos on daring topics, including homosexuality Ghassan Salhab as well as Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Goreige among others excelled in arthouse films dissecting crucial aspects of Lebanese history and society. It is Mohamed Soueid, however, who may be considered the real godfather of post-war Lebanese independent and experimental cinema. He began his career with his first video in 1990 and directed subsequently *Cinema al-Fouad* (Sinima al-fu'ad, 1994), which was at the time most unconventional for portraying a Lebanese transvestite. Soueid also opened for himself and others unprecedented production venues, for example Future TV. His most accomplished documentary, *Nightfall* ('Indama ya'ti al-masa', 2000), part of a trilogy on the civil war, focused on a Lebanese student squad of the Palestinian Fatah movement, to which the director himself belonged. As a one-man crew, Soueid succeeded in capturing the painful but also trivial disillusionment of this group, whose members seem to have sought refuge if not in death and the arts, then in alcohol.

Soueid's ideas and presence encouraged the creation of another backbone of Lebanese alternative film art, namely the association Beirut DC (Development Cinema), run by Hania Mroué and Eliane Raheb. Founded in 1999, the association's major goal remained training, networking, documentation, and the promotion of independent film in Lebanon through coproduction and screenings. One of its most effective cultural initiatives is the bi-annual Ayam Bayrut al-sinim'iyya (the Beirut Film Festival) with its co-production market, as well as a touring Arab Film Week. Its members have moreover been involved in the transnational Arab training programs. Thus, Beirut DC has contributed to creating a cultural atmosphere in which a more innovative film culture could grow, even if this does not translate into a massive re-education of Lebanese audiences, who have been still flocking to the latest American releases. Thus, we may consider Lebanon in fact a vanguard on both levels, technology as well as esthetic and structural innovations.

Finally, it needs to be asserted that an additional crucial factor that supported diversification and has changed conditions of production in the region since the 1980s and the crisis of public sectors in most film producing Arab countries lays in European film funding, the arthouse and international film festival circuit as well as some broadcasters; this along with developmental local and international organizations - whose support has been at times also linked to outright political agendas (cf. Toukan, 2010). While British, German, French and Belgian channels enriched their repertoire by offering from the late 1970s onwards production opportunities for filmmakers from the region the latter have been forced to take the needs and limitations of their Western audiences into consideration. Thus, in combination with the international arthouse circuit for which film festivals stand in the first place the above described evolution has carried the danger to detach cinematic products from their places of origins in terms of reception. In fact, most film producing countries in the region still suffer from a substantial lack of local screening opportunities and adequate venues; adding to that varied degrees of social and political censorship. Online platforms have started to change the picture even though here again, it seems, global inequalities are re-produced in terms of opportunity, affordability, visibility and accessibility among others particularly if we look at those international providers who dominate the field such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. On the other hand quite a number of independently produced Arab films of all formats do either circulate as open-sources online or have been made accessible through VOD platforms such as Vimeo, a phenomenon that has been take roots more profoundly particularly after the 2020 COVID 19 Crisis and has still not been fully assessed yet.

Around the turn of millennium a new pan-Arab funding system evolved which has relied fundamentally on the system of co-production. It was initiated by the different Princes and Royal families of the Gulf Region and Jordan in correlation with film festivals on site, most notably the Abu Dhabi Film Festival and the Dubai Film Festival. While these two collapsed along with the Screen Institute Beirut, the Doha Film Institute and the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture in contrast are still



functional and have been now additionally joined by the Red Sea Film Festival Fund. If we believe statistics, interestingly it was the documentary format that until 2012 had profited most from these initiatives (Rosant, 2012: 15). And little wonder, and this is another argument I am making here, it is precisely this film form that has come even more strongly to the fore in the wake of the uprisings. Definitely, since then and in the aftermath of the Arab uprising the production numbers of so-called creative documentary have increased. Tunisian filmmakers for instance made „eighty-nine documentary films in the first three years alone following the revolution. These include fifty-six long documentaries and thirty-three short ones“ (Ghana, 2021: 80): Egyptian cinema in contrast - historically identified first of all with popular mainstream - made considerable inroads to the arthouse field during the same period which was previously reserved for the other Arab countries, particularly the Maghreb with more than one of them ending up in Cannes in the *Semaine de la Critique (Feathers)* or at the Forum/Berlinale (*Coming Forth by Day*).

It would be an impossible task to mention the thousands of films which appeared since the introduction of new media in general and the outbreak of the rebellion in particular without turning this article into a film dictionary and losing sight of my main arguments. I will therefore confine myself to addressing a few features - more than often related to documentary forms - which I consider highly relevant for the period addressed here without any claims of comprehensibility, just to name guerrilla filmmaking, performative cinema, queer and indigenous esthetics, subjectivity and collectivism. They have imprinted on Syrian Emergency Cinema, Egyptian indies, autobiographic films, Tunisian women's film, Amazigh-Moroccan and Nubian-Sudanese „artivism“, as well as queer cinema in Lebanon and Egypt. Whereby I consider Syrian post-revolution films to be most affected by both, new media/digital technology and the uprising, revealing a quite complex and ambiguous interaction between them.

### **Syrian „Emergency Cinema“**

The notion „Emergency Cinema“ was coined by Cecile Boëx (2012) in her discussion of the Syrian film collective Abounaddara's (Abu Nadara) that was originally constituted in Damascus in 2010 by a group of self-taught volunteer filmmakers. With the beginning of the protests in 2011 the collective started to upload so-called „bullet films“ on a weekly base - often no longer than 3-4 minutes - on Vimeo and Facebook on as a way of political participation in the mainly peaceful Friday demonstrations that marked the Syrian revolution in its early phase (Meicher-Atassi, 2014; Abounaddara Film, 2016). Generally the period saw the emergence of scores of open-source films documenting the events in different places in Syrian, often based on collective efforts relying on either cell phone imagery or increasingly using sophisticated cameras as well as drones smuggled into the areas besieged by the government's troupes and reacting to what was happening on the political arena and the increasingly bloody conflict. In the process two often intertwined film forms started appearing, the fly-on-the wall subjective personal testimony with its more than often shaky hand-held camera and fuzzy imagery on the one hand and the old-school Direct Cinema reportage style with its seemingly detached „objective“ observer and professional cinematography on the other. Both types intersected strongly with the work of local citizen journalists and attached media-collectives.

Mette Mortensen cautioned in fact from a widespread misconception surrounding the term citizen journalism. First of all, its rather subjective and participatory approach tends to be conflated with professional journalism tends to obscure the fact that its representatives are actually engaged in a struggle around their rights as citizen and no independent reporters. Moreover, the latter's output is usually auto-recorded, anonymous, decontextualized and lack factual information on actors and location plus often surrounded by a „media institutional ambiguity“ when working as semi-professional non-credited suppliers of international media channels (Mortensen, 2014: 146-51).

Already in the early phase of the Syrian uprising: „The Syrian citizen journalist on the frontline, armed only with a mobile camera, had become a trope in the narration of the events, especially on the international stage“ (Della Ratta, 2018: 125). By time, „the images of war ‘from the inside’ broadcast on TV were no longer being filmed spontaneously by activists but indirectly or directly produced the international media who could hereby evade ethical, legal or political obligations“ (Fox, 2018: 3). The effect of this reporting has not worked necessarily to the benefits of information and clarification but developed into a double-edged sword in contributing to the reproduction of what Donatella Della Ratta described as the „technological fetish“ (Della Ratta 2018: 112). While the Tunisian uprising in her eyes had wrongly established „the connection between tech-powered activism and progressive politics [...] Syria has proven this view of digital activism to be a fantasy as it can be equally the domain of progressive, liberal politics, or serve as the battleground where counter-revolutionary tactics and strategies are implemented by pro-establishment militants“ (Della Ratta, 2018: 119).

In other words, new media through which quite a number of Syrian films have been released has been too easily conflated with social agency and imagined as a liberating force disregarding the fact that it may be likewise used to perpetuate inequalities and oppression and submit to manipulation. „The regime itself authorized Facebook and YouTube access after years of blocking access. It did this in February 2011, even though social media was supposedly the Arab Spring’s greatest ally“ (Fox, 2018: 5). This development Della Ratta visualizes with exploding numbers, „from entirely lacking a local digital activism ‚scene‘ throughout the 2000s, to counting around 196 active media outlets (...) launched in the aftermath of the uprising“ in Syria until 2016 (Della Ratta, 2018: 113-4). In this context, Syrian activists excelled in experimenting with the use of new media technology, such as drones and 360-degree video (Wessels, 2017: 170).

This development has left, as already mentioned, its mark on the emerging independent Syrian documentary film, particularly Direct Cinema which is said to produce a so-called „reality effect“. „[T]his quality of observation-without-intervention“ became one of the „key claims of a documentary’s truth-value“ (Chanan, 2007: 177) in Western and international filmmaking linked to a discourse of quasi-journalistic objectivity, for which meanwhile quite a number of Syrian post-revolution documentaries may serve as an example, most notably those by Talal Derki and Feras Fayyad. Both directors chose to document from within besieged Syrian cities and received after completion nominations to the Academy Awards for the Best Foreign documentary. Talal Derki’s *Of Fathers and Sons* (‘An al-aba’ wa-l-abna’, 2018) for instance was designed as a classical observation-without-intervention film whereby the director followed the life of an Islamist fighter who prepares his two under-age sons for the battle field. Derk’s preceding *Return to Homs* (al-Awadat illa Homs, 2013) in contrast presented a slightly more personal stance, giving a personal poetic first-person account of the director’s consecutive journeys to besieged Homs where he met his two protagonists and followed their personal trajectory starting from the early protests into a long and draining deadly military siege.

Fayyad’s documentary *Last Men in Aleppo* (Akhir al-rijal fi Halab, 2017) too has been based on the vocabulary of observational quasi „objective“ cinema. Without using any explanatory comment from the side of its author the film portrayed over a period of a few months the life of two Syrian rescue men up to the point when one of them loses his life in the operations. The director who himself had been detained during the protests and was forced to leave Syria relied on the material shot by local cinematographers or „citizen journalists“. The same strategy he used for his second Oscars nominated film *The Cave* (al-Kahf, 2019) presenting a female Syrian doctor who supervised an underground hospital in besieged al-Ghouta under extremely difficult conditions. Its tropes, family, children and medical aid during conflict, feed into the bemoaning humanitarian violations for the sake of political mobilization. Like Derki, he became two times an Academy award candidate.



In the same year of *The Cave*'s nomination another Syrian documentary, the BBC production *For Sama* (Ila Sama, 2019) co-directed by Waad al-Kateab with the British filmmaker Edward Watts received its chance to walk on the Oscars' red carpet. With a big difference though: The latter went much more for an auto-biographic accounting or even diary, and was thus staged as a highly subjective testimony through which the evolution of the siege of Aleppo got told additionally enhanced by the fact that the filmmaker was her own camerawoman and was filming herself, her husband and newborn baby excessively. But not only. One of the film's spectacular scenes, in fact the last before it concluding „family album“ wrap up is typical for the technological novelties of Emergency Cinema. It shows the director/protagonist at first from the front, the camera tilts up from her feet to the face of her child. In the next shot we see her back from a wider angle. Her dress and veil colors are in stark contrast to the grey shades of the ruins. The camera flies forward over her head while she advances into the distance with demolished buildings extending on both side. Then in a third shot it gets elevated vertically into the sky above the roofs to show her walking further amongst the ruins from the bird's eye view. It is not clear who took these drone shots but clearly al-Kateab must have designed and staged it for the sake of her film. In any case it gives evidence of the cooperation of activists on the ground some of whom go almost unrecognized in the film credits of their colleagues whose films went abroad. According to the credits, *For Sama* was „filmed and produced by Waad al-Kateab" but several archival sources are mentioned to whom this film must owe at least parts of its incredible visual and sonic wealth, such as Channel 4 News, Aleppo Media Centre, Darayya Media Center, Hretan Media Center, Qasioun Mews Agency, Thiqa News Agency, along with some individual names, Muhammad Othman, Abdo Al-Halabi and Milad Shihabi.

The diversity of stunning drone sequences, quasi omni-present in Syrian war documentaries may serve as a case in point here. Almost every recent film shows aerial shots from destroyed cities and battle fields and have meanwhile traveled even into Egyptian TV series on the war such as *Backbreaking* (Bi tulu' al-ruh, 2022) by Kamla Abu Zikri. They surely invite to be read as a reproduction of facts, yet in they way they film this reality they also mimic the arial views of the bombers, the perspective of the „armed eye“ (Vertov as quoted in Virilio, 1989: 35) that is confronted with a field of perception congruent to the battlefield. This „liberation“ of the camera through Syrian citizen journalists did not come at a moment where a new society was being formed and technology imagined to assist in designing a better future for citizen. What they have been witnessing instead is a world at war and destruction. Furthermore, their images and the elements of what they documented were mostly used by others and integrated in narratives formed by others as well without even taking their consent.

As I mentioned already in the entry, Syrian filmmaking appears to be the most radically affected by the uprising and new technology at once. Notwithstanding, the landslide of Syrian audio-visual landscape has announced itself already in 2000 with the rise of Bashar al-Assad to power in 2000 and the short-lived Damascene Spring. In combination with the new technology it had allowed the formation of a new generation of filmmakers outside the auspices of the state and the national Film Organization. For many years cinematic expression and activity has been and remained closely monitored by the state and left only with some „freedom in a closed room“ with their films getting produced by the Film Organization but banned upon completion (Mohammad, 2006: 149). Yet, in the first decade of the new millennium independent activities particularly in the field of documentary were on the rise. One of its main facilitators was DOX BOX, now a Berlin based association.

It was established in 2008 and run by ProAction, the first independent documentary production house in Syria owned by Orwa Nyrabia (nephew of Oussama Mohamed) and his spouse Diana El-Jeiroudi (Marks, 2015: 42). Supported by the Dutch IDFA and some other North-European donors and festivals DOX BOX started at first in Syria's capital as an annual documentary film festival projecting

films also in other Syrian cities. Quite quickly, a young middle class „crowd“ began forming itself around it, specially because it also offered the opportunity to attend international film workshops held in Damascus by the UNDP or the Danish, Dutch, Finnish or French Institutes (Van de Peer, 2017: 207, Wessels, 2019: 140). With their increasing exposure to the internet, travels abroad and acquisitions of affordable digital cameras they started to form film crews and shoot in the streets pretending to be tourists (Wessels, 2019: 137).

### **Guerrilla, Indigenous and Collective Filmmaking**

Another prominent though post-revolution collaborative Syrian project we may consider Bidayyat for Audiovisual Arts. After it was masterminded by the two founders of the Kayani collective in cooperation with Syrian filmmaker journalist Mohammad Ali Atassi it was eventually, by 2013, run by Atassi alone in Beirut. Funded by the European Union its official description as an NGO (bidayyat.org) is quite fitting though particularly because of its community and collective oriented motivation and conduct. Decision-making is based on team-work, projects are chosen by an independent committee and the revenues flow back into the NGO. Apart from offering training and financial support to emerging Syrian or Syrian-Palestinian filmmakers it produced dozens of shorts by young talent which are accessible on its website free of charge. One of Bidayyat's important strands of activity was to train young Syrian talents behind the front lines online encouraging them to find their own voices and express themselves despite of the restraining circumstances which allowed at certain instances only hit-and-run strategies or in other words guerrilla filmmaking.

In fact, the question of collective organization particularly in times of social and political unrest poses a lot of challenging questions, of social, ideological as well as cultural nature. Likely to be associated with leftist politics the phenomenon consequently raises crucial considerations with regards to political agency and to subjectivity. Hence and quite significantly, as soon as collectivism defies the concept of intellectual property and individual authorship considered one of the pillars of modern arts - as opposed to collective anonymous forms of expression and *Gestaltung* - it begins to sit uncomfortably within the Western grown individual-society dichotomy. Herein I like to follow Linda Tuhiwai-Smith's argument: „The individual, as the basic social unit from which other social organizations and social relations form, is another system of ideas which needs to be understood as a part of the West's cultural archive. (...) The transition from feudal to capitalist modes of production simply emphasized the role of the individual.“ The problem of the „relationship between the individual and the group (...) tended to be posed as a dialectic or tension between two irreconcilable notions“ (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999: 51).

This dialectic has been most felt in Egypt of course as the first and temporal main center of Arab film industrial production. However, apart from the fact that the country has a long history in cooperativism in the cultural field film collectives in fact have become one of the characteristic traits of Egypt's recent independent or „indies“ film-scape. Yet here again most of the initiatives in question predated the uprising (cf. Shafik, 2021). Largely registered as commercial enterprises to avoid harassment by the authorities, Semat, Fig Leaf Studios, Ruffy's and Hassala have all been founded before 2011. Only Cimatheque and Mosireen emerged as an immediate reaction to the revolt. Indeed Semat came into existence a whole decade earlier, in 2001, with the objective to become an incubator for non-commercial cinema. Hassala (*hasala*, literally 'money box'), was created in 2010 to allow the production of Hala Lotfy's feature length film *Coming Forth by Day* (al-Khuruji illa al-nahar, 2012), a project which had already been in the pipeline for some time. The same applies to Tamir El-Said's docudrama, *The Last Days of the City* (Akhir ayam al-madina, 2016), which went into production in 2008 and was eventually released in 2016. It became the catalyst for two co-operatives, through El-Said's close cooperation with actor Khalid Abdalla (known from *The Kite Runner*, 2007),

one of the founding members of the Mosireen collective who also features in El-Said's film. Mosireen was constituted during the 2011 uprising and included a number of media activists who operated as citizen journalists until 2013.

The Alexandria based Fig Leaf Studios (not a co-operative in the legal sense) in contrast started to operate in 2005. It was instrumental in producing Ahmad Abdalla's *Microphone* (2010) and has a long record in producing experimental films as well as serving as executive producer. Rufy's which may be considered an offspring of Fig Leaf Studios started producing its original short film compilation *Mice Room* (Udat al-Firan) in 2010 which was not released until 2013. The second film, *Microphone* – even more relevant to considerations of collectivism – represents the on- and off-screen contributions of around 30 different groups of artists, musicians and others from Alexandria. The outcome is a kaleidoscopic music film which critically portrays the oppressive nature of official cultural politics.

*Microphone* deals with the marginalization of Alexandria's alternative art scene—rappers, filmmakers, and graffiti artists—by the public Art Centre in favour of more assimilated artists, and at the same time reflects some of the difficulties of their private lives. The film doubtless owes its charm and spontaneity to its workshop character, which allowed the different groups and artists, some of whom feature in the film, to develop stories and characters in a collective effort that lends the film its characteristic polyphony. Here, just like in other Egyptian films of the time, we find signs of the impending unrest in recurrent, almost ritualistic, encounters between citizens and state representatives, all of which are characterized by arbitrary abuse and violent policing. The sudden beating up by police agents of a young street hustler selling music cassettes is a case in point (Shafik, 2016: 227). Yet the film also pictures a transgression into a more liberated and collectively organized existence, ending with a 'breaching' into freedom. The characters rally at the seaside after they have been driven out from the courtyard of the cultural centre and challenge the authorities by performing the concert they have been preparing in the open air and without any permission.

The collective development of stories through a workshop is an important and recurrent feature, whether collectively produced or not. This applies to Ibrahim El-Batout's first widely acclaimed work *Ain Shams* (literally 'Eye of the Sun', 2009), set in one of Cairo's poorest neighbourhoods, which carries also the film's name. Distinguished by its minimal budget, absence of stars, open and almost fragmentary narrative structure with multiple parallel stories, the film owes its improvisational spirit to a theatre workshop involving both professional actors and amateurs. The film also set a precedent in terms of 'guerrilla filmmaking', as El-Batout protested against state censorship by refusing to submit the script to the censor and shooting without any permissions. Before its commercial screening he had to reach a compromise with the authorities to obtain a formal release. Officially the controversy pertained not to the film's content per se but rather to the challenging of standard procedures. Both its narrative style and collective development of the story reflected a trend, emulated by other films such as Maggie Morgan's *Asham: A Man Called Hope* (Asham, 2012). Up to date and despite of the administrative and economic constraints that have increasingly marked filmmaking in Egypt some independent filmmakers are still using „guerrilla“ tactics for shooting and producing their films whose minimal budgets rely solely on individual efforts as well as Arab and European funding.

The same formula for political resistance, namely empowerment of the underprivileged marginalized or exploited „subaltern“ through media literacy- in this case a protesting indigenous community - has been combined with a collective guerrilla mode of production for the Moroccan-Amazigh documentary *Amussu* (2019). It was produced by „the People of Imider" (the French credits state: „produit par les gens de Imider“) and a young Moroccan „artist“ Nadir Bouhmouch (cf. Bahmad, 2022). Its politics unfold on various levels, esthetically as well as on the level of film practice. It relies on a thoroughly organized cooperation between filmmaker and community and supports the latter's

grassroots resistance against a silver mine whose main share holder is the royal family. Operative since 1969 the mine has drained away their water resources and poisoned the environment. As for the narrative structure, Amussu does not stick to any chronology of events but follows an entirely different concept: „The film is told largely through *izlan* poetry, which is a form of poetry that’s indigenous to North Africa. It also looks at the relationship between the community and their land. So we see them harvesting, we see them living their daily lives, and see them feeding their livestock, etc.“ (Bouhmouch as quoted in Jiang, 2019). This concept as well as all stages of and details of mise-en-scene were developed through a specific form of collective indigenous decision-making, the „*agraw*“. Tellingly, the film’s Tamazight title translates quite tellingly to „movement“ and follows the more recent minutes of Imider’s resistance. These begin in 2017 with the Alebban Protest camp on Route 96 and go back to the occupation of the water pipeline that started in 2011 as well as to some crucial events in the history of the struggle. A lot of the material used in the film was recorded in tight circumstances and literally snatched away from the security forces observing the site of protests.

With regards to community based guerrilla filmmaking and collective film practices the oeuvre of Nubian-Sudanese Hisham Haj Omar, better known as Hajooj Kuka surely also needs to be scrutinized. In 2009 he signed for *Darfur’s Skeleton* (2009), a straightforward political and humanitarian mix of interviews and observations from Darfur, its activists, spokesmen and refugees. In the cadre of the 2019 uprising the filmmaker became an active member of Girifina, a Sudanese non-violent resistance movement ([girifna.com](http://girifna.com)), was detained in 2020 by the new government and released after an international outcry on his behalf. Some time earlier, in alliance with three other Sudanese artists Hajooj had co-founded the Refugee Club „whose work reflects an awareness of the transitory state of migration“ ([refugeeclub.com](http://refugeeclub.com)). One of the collective’s members, AlSarah a.k.a. Sarah Mohamed, a Sudanese-American ethnomusicologist and singer features most prominently in his documentary *Beats of the Antonov* (2014). Together they traveled through the Blue Nile and Nuba Mountains region, that is, Central and parts of Northern Sudan documenting the Nubian peoples’s musical and cultural wealth.

It is noteworthy that Nuba’s population is equally divided between Islam and Christianity with a small proportion of pagan or other beliefs. At many filmed occasions the film illustrates how their diverse musical cultures and practices permeate people’s lives and serve, more importantly, as psychological survival tool in the ongoing war with the North Sudanese regime. Face to the persistent shelling of civilians and crops - here it is the Russian bombers which lend the film its name - the film shows laughter and music to be one of the means of resilience. Traversing different landscapes, spaces, mosques, churches, listening to their stories and music AlSarah and Hajooj journey at the same time through Sudan’s basic ailments, a country that since its independence in 1956 has been relentlessly proving the basic failure of the idea of the centralist and unitarist nation state. Through a number of interviews they listen to enlightened Muslims, Sufis, pagans and Moro-Christians among others. These eloquently discredit North-Sudanese tribalist racism, its ferocious Islamism and Arabism that has been forged to degrade the numerous and diverse ethnicities that populate Sudan. In sum they agree that despite of the minimal difference in skin color „every Northern Sudanese bears a little Arab inside“. It makes him insult a person from non-Arab tribes or ethnicities as „black sack“ (*kis aswad*) or „rutana“ (*ratn* means to speak gibberish or non-intelligible).

Hajooj Koka, a Mahas (Nubian) by origin himself, grew up in Abu Dhabi, studied at the American University in Beirut and lived in New York for a while but chose eventually to settle in the war-torn Nuba mountains. There he worked among others as a war reporter and served as the creative director of 3ayin, an alternative Sudanese news network that provides independent reports on Sudan. Moreover, Hajooj started giving drama and filmmaking workshops for displaced people and to teach individuals how to document their everyday lives using visual language with a concentration in

storytelling. Thus, the Nuba Mountain drama group has been creating fiction dramas for theater and cinema which are being shared using mobile cinema projections within Nuba. Thanks to these endeavors the idea to the fiction *aKasha* (2018) crystallized, a comedy commonly developed with the inhabitants of a Nubian village. It is flavored with local humor and rituals, evolving around a young soldier who has to choose between his machine gun and his girlfriend. In this case the collective endeavor and immediate contribution to media literacy and empowerment of specific communities and individuals is evident, however, not as systematic and transparent like in *Amussu* (2019) where the production process is also elucidated through the film itself. In all cases, however, we can state that technology in combination with new media facilitated this kind of politically activist „guerrilla“ filmmaking from the margins.

### **Performative, Feminist and Queer Cinematic Subjectivity**

As for our second line of argument that searches for links between subjectivity and revolution - an extended discussion in fact to which can only be alluded here - we may of course take up Mahmoud Hussein's argument about subjectivity as the basis at least of the Egyptian uprising into consideration. „The country has seen the advent of a generation no longer hindered by the religious myths of predestination and fatality, by the instinctive respect for hierarchies and communitarian conformism; a generation that does no longer fear originality and the unexpected; who has learned to assert itself, to revolt, to say ‚I‘ instead of ‚us‘“ (my translation; Hussein, 2018 synopsis). Surely, Michael Chanan's explanations for the spread of subjectivity in the previously „objectifying“ documentary form add another more universal layer here, a shift he finds tantamount to an epistemological break across the globe, the great turn to the „personal as political“ (Chanan, 2007: 246). „What unfolded in the heartlands of capitalism was a passage from the politics of class to the identity politics and social movements which followed the feminist turn in the 70s, in which the conventional boundaries of social identity were dissolved and subjective selfhood was asserted in forms which challenged old certainties“ (Chanan, 2007: 242).

Clearly this argument diversifies Mahmoud's position as I will explain in the following section. It deals particularly with feminist cinema, performativity and subjectivity in recent filmmaking which definitely stand out as new and crucial developments in the region. While none of them can be directly associated with the advent of digital technology it is still obvious that the latter has facilitated the use of cameras in the very private space of the home in its most radical form the diary or slow cinema long term documentations, just to mention examples from a place that has been for decades deprived of any private and personal approach to cinema, notably Iraq with outstanding examples like Hiba Bassem's video diary *Baghdad Days* (Ayam Baghdadiyya, 2010), a student project of the Baghdad Film School or, more prominently even Abbas Fadhel's *Homeland: Iraq Year Zero* (Watan - al-Iraq sanat sifr, 2015), a decade long observation which begins with the US invasion and ends with the tragic death of the filmmaker's nephew as a result of the deteriorating security situation after the American invasion. It mixes in a typical flow of exilic slow cinema fly-on-the wall recording with innumerable reportage-like excursions into the general events shaping the daily life of the filmmaker's family (cf. Chaudhuri, 2021).

In fact, if we regard autobiographic accounts the most radical form of individualized subjectivity we may even go back around four decades in Arab cinema, first to Youssef Chahine's Egyptian Alexandria trilogy which he began in 1978 with *Alexandria Why?* (Iskandariya lih?, 1978), then to *Dreams of the City* (Ahlam al-Madina, 1984) by Syrian Mohamed Malas and *Golden Horseshoes* (Safa'ih min zahab, 1989) by Tunisian Nouri Bouzid (cf. Shafik, 2016: 58). Around the turn of the millennium autobiographic accounts travelled further into documentaries like for example in Syrian director Omar Amiralay's politically polemic short, *A Plate of Sardines—or, The First Time I Heard*

of *Israel* (Tabaq al-sardin, 1997) just to become highly poetic and sensitive in the following, most visibly in *I Am the One Who Brings Flowers to Her Grave* (Ana allati tahmil al-zuhur illa qabriha, 2006) by Hala al-Abdallah and Ammar El-Beik, a complex journey through al-Abdallah's political and personal past and present.

While the earliest examples of this approach were still dependent on high budgets to please audiences at the box office or European televisions' commissioning editors more recent personal films took the liberty of a handheld camera more than often operated by the filmmaker herself to share her vision of events and political convictions without being too concerned about distribution venues. Often taking the shape of first person account in Egypt for instance, like in the already mentioned first-person documentary, *Egyptian Salad* (2007) the phenomena has continued well into the post-revolution period with numerous films, just to name *Happily Ever After* (Nihayat sa`ida, 2016) by Nada Riyadh and Ayman El-Amir on their personal relationship as an unmarried couple in the times of revolution, or Mohamed Rashad's - a Hasala film collective production - *Little Eagles* (al-Nusur al-saghira, 2016). It dwelled on the inter-generational conflict based on class difference between him and his working class father. Ahmed Nour in turn in *Waves* (Mawj, 2014) reported on the special history and role of his home town Suez during the uprising in mixes animation, basically elements of his personal biography, with strings of interviews and evidence oriented fly-on-the wall material. However, particularly in using the latter's case Alisa Lebow argued that some of the Egyptian revolutionary first-person documentaries spoke in fact for the filmmaker as a representative of a collective and not so much as an individual (Lebow, 2018; [https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/article/108/first\\_personpersonal\\_film](https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/article/108/first_personpersonal_film)).

Of course some filmmakers used this form to make strong political statements or to question social and cultural certainties. Particularly female or same sex oriented filmmakers used it to either express equality oriented feminism particularly face to radical Islamism, or to question heteronormative gender conceptions altogether. One of the most daring films I consider the Algerian documentary *Letter to my Sister* (Lettre à ma sœur, 2006) by Habiba Djahnine with regards to how to imagine female presence and participation in the Algerian resistance and in building a new society in combination with local Kabyle identity - so much contested and challenged on the factual level during the Black Decade characterized equally by Islamist and state terrorism.

Her film Djahnine dedicated to her sister Nabila, once the head of the women's association "Thighri N'tmettouth" (Tamazight/Kabyle for Women's Scream), resident of the Kabyle city Tizi-Ouzou where she served as a school teacher, where she was also assassinated in 1995. A few years later the director undertook a journey to several locations where she encountered a variety of people all acquainted in one way or the other with her activist sister. Literally designed as a letter the film starts with the voice-over of the filmmaker who reflects on her own impressions on the day of her sister's interment. She expresses her contradictory feelings, rage, sadness and denial, her queries while the camera is taken on a drive through the Kabyle landscape. Bit by bit Djahnine pieces the fragments of the story together, a puzzle in fact. It makes us grasp Nabila's extraordinary feminist legacy but does not help solve the riddle of her violent death, knowing that the presumably Islamist perpetrator was tried in absentia and never re-surfaced leaving back a number of open questions with regards to the responsible behind the crime. While women from the villages where Nabila and her combatants had assisted and taught pay tribute to her in words and through a traditional improvised a cappella song, her fellow activists and colleagues are pictured to be still caught in a web of terror and fear resulting, the obvious result of a strong traumatization. The terrorizing force of Nabila's violent death was so effective that it kept some of them shut in their homes for several years refraining from any political or public activity.



Thus, on the political and historical level a sub-story of the Islamist terror and the Black Decade starts leaking through, at least with regards to the involvement and silencing of the feminist groups who actively took part in the protests of the years 1989-92. For the women did not only have to beware of the conservatives but were more than often intimidated by the other side as well when summoned to the police and military security. Djahnine's letter closes with a life interview of Nabila denouncing the unequal treatment of cases of violence against women and femicide, a fact that signals that women's lives count less. In a more than visionary manner she states herein that the „logic of crime and terrorism is to eliminate any potential inconvenience“. Clearly Nabila, an outspoken and respected feminist had to be eliminated because she was inconvenient. However, the subjective voice of her sister is still being heard even if it comes from the margins, a subjectivity that neither state nor political terror managed to suppress. This subjectivity in fact has surfaced in different ways and quite a while before the latest wave of protests.

Doubtless quite a number of these recent films which express subjectivity communicate a strong understanding of the body as a fundamental „storyteller“, a body that is not just a building block in a vocabulary or symbolic system, it is in itself the site of socio-political contestation and drama, a powerful point of convergence between the physical and the imagined. The complex interaction between collective and personal historical events, factual versus inner realities dubbed as phantasy offers itself as a rich reservoir even for historical research the moment it liberates itself from the dictum of morality or objectivity as well as heteronormative demarkation lines. As a post-uprising example we may cite Samaher Alqadi's *As I Want* (Kama urid, 2021), a strongly participatory autobiographic documentary that uses the female body - the filmmaker's herself first of all - as the very locus of cultural and political contestation.

Triggered by the severe cases of sexual harassment and rape on the Tahrir Square in 2013 to whom Alqadi's closest girlfriend fell prey she unleashes her unrestrained wrath against the multiple forms of abuse she and others experienced and becomes strongly palpable in various scenes and on several levels. There is the common and collective anger expressed in the all-female demonstrations which broke out after the assaults, condensing among others in the emblematic of her friend-survivor and others carrying a knife as a sign of non-surrender as an immediate reaction to the events. Alqadi, however, does not stop at that point, she records herself and gets documented while reacting aggressively to men on the street, involving them in didactic fights at the smallest sign of intrusion. At one point she reverses the rules of the game and pursues a man to teach him a verbal lesson about harassment. Also on the personal level Alqadi decides to take matters further. Married to supportive Egyptian-Swedish-American Karim El-Hakim producer, cinematographer and director, pregnant at the time of the shooting, already mother of a six years she documents their familial state of emergency as dwellers of downtown Cairo, hotspot of the uprising and witnesses of a failing revolution. But eventually she delves also into her own past: „I have never thought about the dark and painful things that has happened to me before I witnessed what happened to women at the Tahrir Square in those revolutionary days and I saw how the strong women around them reacted to the injustices. Those women's power entered my body and made me speak up“ she says (Refsing, 2022). Born in Palestine, in the Jalazone refugee camp Alqadi decides to visit her family and to confront and contemplate the oppressive treatment of herself and other family members as well as her late mother's ambivalent behavior as one of the layers of her feminist revolutionary coming-out.

Culture and the body meet only to conflict; the scars which we bear are the traces of our bruising intrusion into the symbolic order“, says Terry Eagleton in his dissection of Sigmund Freud's theoretical foundations (Eagleton, 1990: 265). This view that reminds also of Jacques Lacan's terminology may be complemented with Foucault's argument about the disciplinary nature of civilization in the way it reproduces „docile bodies“ (Foucault, 1979: 138). Human rights violations of the various authoritarian and totalitarian post-colonial states, different wars, up to the events of the

Arab uprisings have underscored to which extent resistance and its oppression takes place in the physical sphere, that is, imprints itself directly on the human body, be it in the maiming and killing of civilians and protesters or the sexual harassment of activists and protesters.

For that reason, and without expanding on different forms of performative cinema I will sketch out only a few more of the filmic strategies that are based on deconstructive and disruptive ways of recycling and quoting inspired by Judith Butler's notion of performativity. Of course performative cinema entangles image and film structure (editing but also physical and musical rhythmicality) in a way that is fundamentally related to the body and consequently to the latter's complex ways to create and oppose cultural practices and their order. Its strategies imply giving special attention to inner realities instead of factual representation and putting strong emphasis on the human (gendered) body and its language but tend to subvert it through a performative reflexive or parodic recycling such as witnessed in Eliane Raheb's *Miguel's War* (Harb Mighil, 2021). Here, in joint co-operation with her queer main character the Lebanese filmmaker unwinds a dramatic spiral of self-deceit in using all kinds of documented procedures: confrontational debates, interviews, interactive observations, staged scenes, such as the recruitment of actors to re-play central scenes in the protagonist's life, and finally animation.

Filmmaker Raheb accompanies her protagonist through his new home town in Spain and on journeys back to Lebanon as well as to Syria. At times she lets herself be pulled into bickering onscreen fights with her main character while trying not to lose herself in the maze of Miguel's biography and all the believable and unbelievable detours his story has to offer. In the process she manages to unlock dark spots and some of his self-created myths crumble. Center piece of this deconstruction is a meeting with Miguel's supposed wartime lover Tony. The latter, however, when finally found and questioned does not even remember Miguel. In their conversation the main character's memory of the geography of events gets shaken and become questionable altogether. In the end, some signs of a personal reconciliation surface, for instance during a visit Syria where he is hit by an unexpected sensation of familiarity, grief and nostalgia at a moment where he is supposed to meet the only person who felt compassion for him during his childhood, his Syrian nanny.

Eventually we understand: Raised in Beirut by religious catholic middle class parents Michel developed a special stance of guilt complex related to his suppressed homosexuality: While he was watching a film about the life of Jesus Christ, he felt aroused and became obsessed with washing men's feet including his father's. A major source of his trouble lay in the feeling of not being accepted by his mother, a woman of Syrian origin who evidently had a stronger appreciation for her second more masculine son. To prove to his family that he was also a „man“ Michel joined in 1983, at the age of 18, the isolationists Christian Phalanges. A center piece of his war memories is when he had his first sexual experience with Tony, one of the toughest fighters who boasted that he had just raped a little Palestinian girl during the Shatila camp massacre. Not much later in a fit of rage Michel beats his mother up and runs off to Spain. In Madrid, he changes his name to “Miguel”. Suicidal and masochistic he delves into homo-sexual adventures with men, in a time when Spain was living the post-Franco years of liberty. Years later Miguel has become a successful interpreter who shares an apartment with a platonic love, a Spanish woman of his age. “It is true that I have slept with more than two thousand men but I was never in love, and it seems that I will never be”.

Judith Butler has so skillfully drawn attention to the manner how gender identities get forcefully constituted through linguistic assaults which are acting upon us facilitated by our corporeal vulnerability. For „gender assignment might be understood as primary and traumatic mode of name-calling“ she says (Butler 2017: 178-7). Naturally and this is the crucial point here this process Butler does not perceive as a one way road. Interruptions, but also disruptions and interruptions of bodily quotations or stagings that (re-)produce gender may likewise subvert and re-direct reproductive

affirmative performativity into queerness. One of the most expressive devices El-Raheb uses in her film is Michel's body. Her camera observes him relentlessly, often she closes down shots on his face. She uses him as her object of gaze, not just because he also used to drag and perform in clubs but also in close observation of his mimics and gestures, the almost invisible shifts in facial expression, while he for instance assists in the casting of his alter ego, of the main figures in his life, his mother, his father, Tony, Jesus. It is in fact through this focus that doubts as well as the glimmering of a possible „truth“ about him get channeled and manifest themselves. It is as if through this focus and the reenactments the experiences that have been inscribed into his body gets re-externalized to become recognizable and even speakable.

It needs to be noted that hitherto Lebanon must be considered leading in the field of queer and homosexual representations. Mohamad Soueid's intimate portrait *Cinema Fouad* (1994) on a cross-gender Lebanese Mohamed Soueid was mentioned already, as well as Akram Zaatari's videos *Crazy of You* (Madjnounak, 1997) and *The Red Chewing Gum* (al-'Alka al-hamra', 2000). More recently, some autobiographic documentaries appeared such as *This Little Father Obsession* (no Arabic title, 2016) by Selim Mourad, Anthony Chidiac's *Room for a Man* (Ghurfa li-rajul, 2017). A more „dialogic“ film was presented by Raed Rifai with his *Eccomi Eccoti* (Ha ana ... ha anta) following the minutes of the filmmaker's cross-cultural same-sex relationship with an Italian. Elsewhere too homosexuality and queer identities have come to the fore, like in *Salvation Army* (Jaysh al-tahrir 2013) by Moroccan Abdallah Taia is one of the earliest Arab fiction films to focus solely and explicitly on the biography of a male homosexual. It was in parts shot in Morocco co-produced by Nabil Ayouch's Ali'N Production in contrast to Algerian Amor Hakkar's bi-sexual triangle love story, *A Few Days of Respite* (Quelques jours de répit, 2011) that is entirely set in France, just like the extremely daring *The Warmest Color is Blue* (Le bleu est une couleur chaude, 2013) by Tunisian Abdellatif Kechiche (ʿAbd al-Latif Kashish) that includes several scenes of graphic representations of lesbian sexuality. In Egypt too untarnished and graphic representations of same-sex love and eroticism have found their way to the silver screen, first and foremost, with the experimental *Shall I Compare You to a Summer's Day?* (Bashta'lak sa`at, 2022) by Mohamed Shawky Hassan which premiered at the Berlinale. Reviewing different chapters of a love relationship through performative cross dressing enactments, songs as well as animated phantasy scenes combined with a number of interviews staged by the director with different friends and lovers.

The role of the author as performer serves as one of the options of performative embodiment of dissidence and polyphony. Be it in her visible onscreen or alluded participatory offscreen presence the body of the filmmaker herself and its performance becomes the transmitter in the gears of the film. The different degrees of direct and indirect performativity may be even willingly deconstruct the „factuality discourse“ (Roscoe & Hight, 2001), blurring the boundaries between documentary and fiction, reality and imagination, the factual and the parodic. They may imply different forms of staging and body performance, but not only. These are films that present the self or other through either intimate or controversial portraits, that enact heterosexual and same-sex couple relationships (as I showed already), re-enact traumatic collective experiences for the sake of criticism, catharsis or healing - and last but not the least - mockumentaries, which push for change through parody. Just like through queerness a demontage of heteronormative schemes and cultural machismo may be offered by means of parody and the destabilization of the borders between fiction and non-fiction. Kaouthar Ben Hania's fake documentary or also mockumentary, *The Challat of Tunis* (Shallat Tunis, 2012) based on Kamal al-Riyahi's novel *al-Mashrat* (The Razor) (uncredited) departs from a staged journalistic investigation. Here the filmmaker, playing herself, wants to track down a legendary criminal character, the infamous Challat Tunis. The latter was supposedly arrested and sentenced for using a razor blade to slice open the backsides of girls wearing tight pants (*challat* literally means razor in Tunisian colloquial). As the narration goes, Ben Hania manages to find the perpetrator and some of his alleged victims and makes them testify against him on the way she keeps running into

different aspects of Tunisian machismo. The interviews intersect with two enterprises related to and inspired by Challat's case, namely the development of a virginity testing machine and a computer game where the goal is to slice as many female butts as possible. However, at times the credibility of the witnesses crumbles as one woman for instance admits to have fabricated her accusation and her main protagonist disappears all of a sudden creating doubts in his real identity and his involvement in the case altogether.

With its stylistic choices and its satirical tone the film naturally pokes fun at Tunisia's macho culture. It manages, moreover, to break loose from the pre-revolutionary feminist dogma of Tunisian cinema that served involuntarily as a cover-up for Ben Ali's repressive human rights policies (Shafik, 2016: 304) and to address the complexity of gender as a cultural construct. Instead of formulating direct accusations against patriarchy, the film moves in precisely the opposite direction by participating in the process of its construction and fabrication. Herewith she also elucidates the highly performative aspects of gender in the sense of Judith Butler. This is not say that all Tunisian post-revolution feminist films went into that direction, not even Ben Hania herself. Her following *Beauty and the Dog* (Ala kaff `afrit, 2017) was a rather traditional and highly polarizing depiction of gender inequality and less nuanced than for instance Hind Boujemaa's *Noura's Dream* (Hulm Nura, 2019) which depicted the strangling combination of corruption and legislative inequalities affecting the life of a working class woman.

Notwithstanding, the strong variation in approaching gender and sexual identity showing in the above discussed films backs my argument of diversification supported by and likewise informing the social and political transformation - real and aspired - during the last three decades. Also, as I have argued it is more than obvious to which large extent digital technology and new media have facilitated the esthetic and thematic diversification and allowed a hitherto unprecedented subjectivity as expressed through the different cinematic formats. This has also permitted so-called regional independent films to find niches and audiences outside of the grown local as well as international mainstream and arthouse circuits.

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