

Bidayyat \ One Who Wants to Know, and Another Who Tries to Remember (A Conversation)

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Raya Yamisha

Rania Stephan, Lebanese artist & filmmaker, based in Beirut, artistic advisor, workshop coordinator, trainer and editor with Bidayyat, 2013–19, in conversation with Raya Yamisha, Syrian editor, based in Leipzig, editor with Bidayyat, 2014–19, Berlin, February 2022.

1. EXT. STREET IN BERLIN – EARLY MORNING

Raya Yamisha

Look, when we walk together in Berlin, you're always walking quickly, and I walk slowly. It was the same during editing. "Raya," you'd say, "let's cut here, that's enough." I slowed everything down; you accelerated things.

Rania Stephan

You also taught me to slow down a bit. I'm a fast reader of images. But I learned from you that viewers might not be as fast. Now I can see that in some of the older films I edited, my obsession was always not to bore the spectator. I would cut as soon as I finished reading the image.

In the last film I edited, which was for an anthropologist, I paid more attention to that. I didn't slow down, but I think I calmed down. My editing is still crisp, because that's my personality, and I can't change that. But now the images breathe a bit more.

I watched how you edited between shots. You were velvety in your cuts. Now I know that the velvety touch can work for me too. It gives editing another flavor.

RY

Walter Murch said that when he reads a text, he sees sounds and images. When I see rushes, I transform them into a text with punctuation.

RS
I love making an image speak. In my mind, sound should be a constitutive element of the image, as strong as the image. Image and sound should have the same status and not override or eliminate each other. Both have to remain in step, like in a—

RY
—tango!

RS
—dance.

2. INT. EINSTEIN CAFE, CHECKPOINT CHARLIE – MORNING

2.1 (ON GENERATIONS)

RY
Do you know why I wanted to work in film?

RS
Why?

RY
When I was young, I wanted to make a film in reaction to what my parents told me about heaven. When I started thinking about heaven, I always wondered: If right now, in Syria, I can't get along with my own parents, or with anyone else from an older generation, then what would it be like in heaven? How can a person who died a thousand years ago get along with someone born in the internet age? I was sure then that discontent and disagreement was a generational problem.

I thought about making a film: Two people seated in a bar, a close-up on their faces. They start up a conversation, but they can't understand each other. Traveling shot, the camera dollies back. Anchoring shot of a place called Bar Heaven. The bar is on the banks of a river of wine. Two

people sit there, but they can't communicate!

(laughter)

RS
It's a funny idea—generations, lost in translation, stuck in paradise.

RY
In Gemmayzeh, where I lived for seven years in Beirut, the neighborhood was mixed. There were Lebanese, Syrians, Westerners, South Asians.

Then, when I moved to Germany, I didn't understand German, but I lived on a street full of Arabs, in a house with five Germans; everyone spoke to me in English. The whole street was covered in Arabic shop signs, and everyone spoke Arabic. Three days after I arrived the lockdown started, so I couldn't go to language school. How could I be sure I was even in Germany?

RS
What do you call this feeling?

RY
A cultural glitch!

(The service bell rings . . . Raya and Rania stand up to collect their coffees from the bar.)

RY
What do you think about generations?

RS
I feel that the knowledge I can accumulate with experience is useless if it's never transmitted to a younger generation.

RY
But what can a younger generation give you in return if you've already accumulated all this experience?

RS

We met in Bidayyat. We arrived there together. We were from different backgrounds, with different pasts; I was at least a generation older than you, and I liked that we were from different generations. I came with some experience; you came with some skill. I never felt you were lacking anything. You didn't teach me editing, but I liked to watch how your mind worked. It's not just that you taught me how to use software, that you taught me shortcuts in Adobe Premiere Pro. It's about how you think through the present. This is what interested me: how you think through things, differently than I do.

That's what I've been trying to tell you: I learned more from you than I could have taught you.

2.2 (ON MONTAGE WORDS/ MONTAGE IMAGES)

RY

When we were working together, I realized something. We edit in different ways but we often arrive at the same solution. What I understood working with you was that "an image summons another image." You used to repeat that phrase all the time. Up until then, I was thinking along different lines: "a word beckons another word."

Did I tell you how I edited my first film? I opened Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*. It was my reference book for years. Kundera analyzes how novels were written throughout history, how rhythm is built in a novel. And I thought films were like novels. I didn't really look at images; I'd listen to what was being said in them. This worked well with the first Bidayyat films I edited, because the images were not so great!

(laughter)

I'd listen to what the characters were saying. I couldn't construct a plot, but I could build a structure around their words.

Then, when I started working with you, of course you were attentive to what was being said, but because it's cinema, the important thing for you was the image. I learned from you how to read an image.

RS

When did you start thinking along those lines?

RY

When we first had this conversation at Bidayyat in 2016 or 2017. We were discussing the construction of a scene. You were showing me what was inside the image, and I was asking, "What are they saying?" I could remember what was said, but not what was within the frame.

At the end, we came to a similar construction of the scene, but you were seeing images and sound, you constructed the images in the scene and added nonsynchronized dialogue underneath. Up until then, I only really edited direct sound and image together.

RS

Was that when we were working on *Still Recording* (2018)?

RY

Yes.

RS

Did my approach work?

RY

We deleted the scene in the end.

(laughter)

3. INT. CINEMA MUSEUM – NOON

3.1 (ON TECHNOLOGY)

RS

When did you arrive in Beirut?

RY

April 2013. I lived in Beirut for six or seven years.

RS

Did you start working with Bidayyat straight away?

RY

I started by editing shorts.

RS

As a freelancer?

RY

Sort of. I was working with an NGO, making films about refugee students in the Beqaa Valley. Then I went to Bidayyat.

RS

At Bidayyat I was impressed by how you could seamlessly navigate between all the Abode applications: between Encoder, Photoshop, Illustrator, then back to Premiere, juggling them so easily.

RY

Maybe because you weren't used to working with those applications.

RS

I hadn't yet mastered the gymnastics of jumping from one application to another. Now I'm better, but I'm still not very technical. I know how to construct a film, how to imagine a concept for a film, but I still google tutorials to learn how to do technical stuff.

RY

At the place I worked in Damascus, they

only let girls work on simple programs. They'd say things like, it's because "girls don't know how to drive" or "their brains are less developed," so women can only do the coloring. The coloring section was all women, and I started in color correction. Girls can do coloring—

RS

—and sewing.

(laughter)

RY

No one wanted to teach me Adobe Premiere, and no one really knew how to use it either. I learned by myself.

RS

How did you get to editing?

RY

I slowly accumulated technical skills. I also read books and learned how to build a series of shots.

RS

Did you arrive in Beirut from Syria already an editor?

RY

I wasn't an editor there. I was what we called a "composer." I would receive material, and I was responsible for arranging and ordering it, changing things around. But I didn't do the actual editing. I worked in 3D, animation, color correction.

RS

If Syria was about composing, and Lebanon was about editing, then what will Germany be about?

RY

Montage, but of stupid films.

(laughter)

3.2 (MIMESIS, MAGIC, POWER)

RS

Earlier you mentioned that the experience at Bidayyat involved editing and living the same things at the same time.

RY

I began to understand what was happening—happening to me—through what I was editing. Things reflected on each other. It was difficult, but useful. But the material would constantly remind me of the fact that . . .

(silence)

I was living in Beirut but it was as if I were still living in Syria. My mind was elsewhere. I would have loved to work on films that had nothing to do with war, even if they were about Syria. I was so tired of the war. War, war, war all the time, and then what? The most difficult thing about it was that I didn't have any distance from what was happening. Nor did the filmmakers. We were living the event and editing it at the same time. The pain was still raw.

RS

What choice did we have?

RY

When I see a film I edited five years ago, I ask myself, Why did I do it like that? Why was I so emotional about that scene? Why wasn't I more—

RS

—rational?

RY

—distant. Now I have some distance. I feel differently about it. I'm not editing an event while living it. Back then I was

living it, and at the same time my life was being destroyed along with what was being destroyed in the images in front of me.

RS

Did the films ever help you transcend the crisis?

RY

Yes, because while editing we were also helping each other. Some were better at this than others. We would sometimes laugh even though the subject was tragic. Sometimes we would embellish reality. We'd erase things that happened that we didn't like. When they disappeared, we could be happy about their erasure. That's the magic of montage.

RS

And its power!

3.3 (INDIFFERENCE)

RY

The other thing in documentary, other than storytelling and rhythm, is that you have to respect the characters, because these are their real-life stories. I always put myself in the shoes of the character and refuse to put anything in the film that's undignified. I just can't do it.

In 2011 and 2012, screens were full of images of dead Syrians. I refused to watch those images. I remember writing a Facebook post in 2012: "If the world is indifferent to our death, that's one thing; but if we're indifferent to our own death, that's another."

I had dreams that I had died, and I'd have to find someone to stop the cameras from filming me. I couldn't understand why we were represented without dignity; why they put all these images of dead people on TV; why all the images of people screaming in front of their destroyed homes.

Sometimes this type of image can help the story make sense, but I couldn't use it in my editing. At Bidayyat, [Mohammad] Ali Atassi and I shared the same approach. I belong to the same place these images come from, and humanly I can't do otherwise. I can't say it's normal in a film to put images of a man going crazy or a woman screaming because of her loss. It doesn't only concern the dead; it's about the living too.

3.4 (THE SEVERED HAND)

RS

I have reservations regarding the issue of dignity. Ali and I fought over it. You know me: I don't use images haphazardly, thoughtlessly. I'm against the spectacle and its commerce. But I'm also against dogmatism. This can turn into a dogmatic position that represses discussion and creative ideas about the use of images in a film. We have to think carefully about every image we use and how we use it in its context.

There was this scene shot by Ghaith Beram that was used in *Still Recording*. It was the aftermath of a car bomb, and Ghaith was filming a boy, a street kid. Do you remember the scene? Ghaith talks to him for a long time, and the kid explains what happened. Then Ghaith pans slightly and captures a severed hand. It's not clearly visible as a hand, but you can see it's a body part. Ghaith then silently pans back to the kid and continues the conversation.

Ali Atassi wanted to cut that camera movement. I told Ali that the most important thing here was the long take, the *plan-séquence*. It's important not to cut, in order to give time for the scene to develop, to feel its duration and construction, and to feel the relation between the two. I wasn't saying that we should cut to a

close-up of the hand and make a spectacle of it. But in the context of the film, I wouldn't be offended to see a severed hand. It was a war scene, a kid caught up in the aftermath of a car bomb.

Do we want to make a "clean" war in our documentaries? I don't want to degrade bodies or people. I don't want to make anyone undignified. It's very perturbing when that happens in a film. But I feel we can't become dogmatic; we need to constantly renegotiate the image, every time, all the time, and to be in a constant negotiation between ourselves and the image. Every image should be debated, and never once and for all.

Ali and I disagreed. Ali said that Bidayyat doesn't show these kinds of images. I forgot what happened in the end . . .

RY

We removed the scene altogether!

(laughter)

3.5 (SCARCITY AND PRODUCTION)

RS

I'm not saying everything should be permitted. But we need to keep thinking, and keep the dialogue open, the negotiation open. Syrians rose up against oppression, dogma, and dictatorship; why impose new dogmas?

RY

I agree—every shot has to be discussed independently and in context. I didn't think there was a problem with the severed hand. But there was a problem with using the image of the boy.

RS

Why?

RY
He's a victim.

RS
No, I don't agree. If he consents to talk to the camera, you can't go back and—

RY
That's my point of view. And that's part of the difficulty. In the editing room, the editor, the director, and the producer each have a responsibility for making difficult moral decisions. We argue because the director has an opinion, the producer has another opinion, and I have a third opinion.

I sometimes discussed this with Ali. The problem isn't only about dead bodies. Sometimes, when we constructed a film, a character would come out very badly. That could be worse than using images of a dead body. In the context, it was so hard for a character to represent only themselves. I mean—

RS
—when someone from the Syrian opposition is presented badly, there's an anxiety that it discredits the whole opposition?

RY
Exactly.

RS
So how do you do it?

RY
People were watching documentaries in order to understand what was happening in Syria. But you can't really know what's happening in Syria if you only watch one film, or even twenty films. You have to talk to twenty million Syrians!

RS
That's impossible . . .

RY
I know, but the problem was that people thought a film represented The Opposition, The Men, The Women, The Fighters, The Civilians, This or That Region . . . But it only really represented those particular characters or that particular place. We should have been humbler about what a documentary can do.

RS
Bidayyat was an interface between Syria and the outside world. So many film-makers came through Bidayyat, but the difficulty also stemmed from the fact that there weren't enough films being produced. When there's scarcity, the few films produced have to bear all this weight, the responsibility to represent the whole Syrian situation, even when a film only represents itself.

RY
Exactly.

RS
Now things have changed, production has increased . . .

RY
And accumulated . . .

RS
It's a good thing.

4. EXT. ORANIENSTRASSE – AFTERNOON

4.1 (THE WHOLE AND THE IMAGE)

RY
Do you feel that all the films you worked on about Syria and the workshops you supervised made you understand Syria better? Or made you closer to Syrians?

RS

The workshops changed me. Through Bidayyat, I met young people fresh out of Syria and saw their raw footage. It was a very powerful experience. It was also complex. We had to understand them, their images, their relation to their images, what they could do with the material, and how to deal both with them and with their images—all at the same time.

What their images actually showed and what they thought they showed were often two very different things. We had to make them conscious of their own images, then help them decide what to do with them, and not let anyone else decide for them. That was very important: helping them think through their material and not rush into doing something they might regret.

The whole thing was the experience, not just watching the images. Bidayyat itself was in the making.

RY

We also spent long periods of time on editing, so we really got to know the filmmakers. The questions weren't only our own, they didn't only regard Syria; there were also larger questions, human questions, existential questions.

RS

And cinematic questions. Editing is a lot about a conversation with a director. The technical part takes less time. I need to know their thinking, their relation to the material, what they want from it, how the material does or doesn't reflect their ideas, and all the complexities around it. It's a complicated constellation, an enigma. But I have to understand it in order to edit convincingly.

Often directors arrive with the material thinking it's about this event, when in fact it's about something else

that's deeper and hidden. The material responds to an unconscious desire, rather than being what the filmmaker says it's about. I have to make them see the material as it is, not as they think it is. That changes a film.

RY

That's what I like about your films, and it's something I aspire to in my editing. There was a time when I thought that a film should always make the audience cry.

(laughter)

Often the Syrian films I saw had that problem: they used sad music to try to make the audience cry, even when the story itself was already sad. A foreigner once asked me, "Where are you from?" I said, "Syria." And he instantly had tears in his eyes.

I don't want us to be a sad story! We can be bad, unnerving, funny . . . we're not just victims. That's what I ask from a film: to be good or bad, unnerving or provoking, not just to make me cry.

5. INT. HKW, BERLIN – LATE AFTERNOON

5.0 (CHRONOLOGIES)

RS

How did we meet?

RY

At the first Bidayyat workshop. You were one of the mentors leading the workshop. They screened your film on Soad Hosni. I came with Sara Fattahi. We met there, but we didn't speak. I saw the film and loved it. I've never seen a more beautiful film.

RS

Thank you!

RY

I didn't realize at the time that it was edited out of sixty-five different films, because the story works very well. Her characters change but she remains. When we met later, we talked about the film and about editing.

5.1 (ONE)

RS

How long did you stay with Bidayyat?

RY

I worked with Bidayyat in Beirut from 2014 to 2019. Before that I worked with a production house in Syria from 2004 to 2009.

RS

I think the Syrian experience was unique in the history of cinema. People who didn't know how to make films were driven to capture images so as to prove or testify to what was happening to them. Some brought these images with them to Lebanon, landed at Bidayyat, and came to see you. And you had to figure out how to narrate their story. Did you feel that you had to use old models for this new experience? Or that you needed to invent new modes of narration for your stories? What did the Bidayyat experience bring you?

RY

The first film I edited began in a Bidayyat workshop: *Coma* (2015), by Sara Fattahi.

The editing didn't conform to what they teach you in cinema school. I constructed the editing as if I were writing a paragraph. I was careful to use smooth edits, but when I needed to mark a "full stop" and not a "comma," I'd edit with sharp cuts, at crucial moments in the dialogue.

That worked out because Sara gave me space in the editing process. She shot

long takes. She only filmed inside her own home. I used to cut to black, cut here, cut there. Sara hadn't gone to film school either. I would call our style "freestyle"; it wasn't even a style.

RS

Maybe it's a style of its own, specific to the context. Do you think there's only one school of editing for a particular moment? Or could you have found other ways to build the narrative?

RY

It's about the conversation you have with the filmmaker. It was her story, not mine. I had to adapt to her way of thinking. I'd known Sara for a long time, and she had been thinking about the film for three or four years.

RS

Since before the revolution?

RY

Yes, way before. She wanted to make a film about her parents, her grandfather in particular. She trusted me and knew that I would care about how to represent a very personal subject, her family. But she also left me to play with the narrative. When I suggested edits, she would agree.

RS

Later, in the second film you did with Sara, *Chaos* (2018), in Austria, were you as free as in the first one? Or did you feel you needed to conform to a mainstream format?

RY

Time had passed. She was in a different country, and her way of working had changed. But she kept the same style. She's working on a trilogy.

5.2 (TWO)

RS

What's the second film you made with Bidayyat?

RY

I worked with someone I didn't know before, Avo Kaprealian, on *Houses without Doors* (2016). Avo's a different person; his style is different, and what he wanted for the film was totally different. Everything was different from the first experience. Maybe the common element was that they both started filming in their own home, one in Damascus, the other in Aleppo.

RS

They also filmed what was going on around them.

RY

I didn't know him well. We had long conversations so I could get to know what he wanted and how to translate his ideas into the film—to understand how he filmed and why; why he had only ten hours of rushes and why he wanted to include archival film; what was being said in Armenian, the language spoken in the film; or why, when his parents had an hour-long conversation, he'd only translated a few sentences for me; or why the camera was so shaky; or why he wanted music here, etc., etc. It was difficult.

I knew Sara, and we'd talked about her film before, so it only took four or five months of editing. With Avo, it took a whole year.

RS

What do you think about it now?

RY

I like it. It's a bit experimental.

RS

Was it his first film?

RY

Yes. He was a theater director in Syria before.

5.3 (THREE)

RS

After that?

RY

I worked with Orwa Al Mokdad on *300 Miles* (2016). I'd had enough of editing. I was tired. I had doubts about my ability as an editor. But Orwa encouraged me. "Let's try," he said.

It was a lovely experience, different from all the others. It was a dialogue between two characters not living in the same place. One was a fighter from the north of Syria; the other was his niece from the south. That was unbelievable. Through the fighter, I started to understand the motivations, the logic, of something I'd never done.

RS

Exactly. Through the film we begin to understand the motivations of someone who took up arms, something we didn't understand with such intimacy before. The idea behind the film was very strong. The end product was a bit confusing . . .

RY

Orwa has a strong character. It was hard to convince him about anything. He had a precise vision for each scene, and he was often inflexible.

RS

It was his first film—why couldn't he take advice?

RY

He'd made a short film before. But it took a lot of discussion.

RS

How long did the editing take?

RY

Four months. We had this interesting discussion about how to end the film. We had so many options for the final scene. We had one where the main character disappears into the fog. I didn't want to end in the fog. "Why can't we find something more hopeful?" I asked.

We both thought that if we could end the film in a more positive way, rather than in this "foggy" way, our lives too might become more positive . . .

(laughter)

Finally, we instead chose a scene where the girl waits for the sun to rise.

In all the films I edited, I started to have this discussion with directors. I tried to make them aware of the importance of the final scene for the audience. Later, I didn't manage to convince Saeed and Ghiath while editing *Still Recording*. I would never have ended the film with this death scene.

5.4 (FOUR)

RS

After Orwa?

RY

Afraa's film.

RS

Skin (2016). How was that?

RY

I met Afraa Batous at Bidayyat. She was filming a bunch of friends who had left Syria. They were all from the same city, Aleppo. They shared a dream of creating a theater troupe together. But after everything that happened, they took different sides. They couldn't even agree politically, but they managed to remain friends. The film is about our generation, the way it's floundering.

Her footage shot in Beirut showed how their friendship was dying, how circumstances separated them. I was living the same thing, the same experiences.

RS

So was it difficult to edit and live the same thing at the same time?

RY

Very.

RS

What was difficult about it?

RY

I hadn't realized that editing is also a state you live in. You can't live more than one film at a time, or without a break between films. But I was doing that: editing and living the same things at the same time, film after film. It wasn't exactly my story, but it was very close.

If I had to edit *Skin* now, it would be easier because I'm not living it now, even though I lived it in the past; it would be a different kind of difficulty.

5.5 (FIVE)

RS

And after that?

RY

Still Recording. We worked together on it

for nearly two years. We never reached a final cut. You were the artistic advisor. The best thing about *Still Recording* is that I learned a lot from you.

RS
We learned that it's important to dance while editing.

(laughter)

5.6 (BURNOUT)

RY
I learned a lot through our discussions in the editing room. They taught me what cinema is, what a scene is, what a cut is, and how images and sounds don't have to be synchronized.

RS
You can play, recreate something new out of the material itself. You don't have to align raw material into a chronology. We have to reshape the material, reshuffle sounds and images in order to reach the original story, its essence.

RY
Yes, to reach what's in- in- in- inside the story. I didn't know that.

RS
With *Still Recording*, we'd drawn up a blueprint for the film on the blackboard, and we kept to the plan.

RY
The difference and difficulty was how to go about it . . . It was the first time I had to work with codirectors: Saeed and Ghiath. And the film was shot by five cameramen, and we had five hundred hours of rushes . . .

RS
And two years of editing . . .

RY
Two years . . . it was exhausting. There were no clear characters in the film, unlike the other films I worked on.

RS
And there was no preconceived idea for a film. At first, there was just material gathered together.

RY
That was exhausting too, because it was really about the war, and it was only about men; there were no women. It was psychologically tiring. But it was still an important experience.

RS
Were you upset because you didn't finish the editing?

RY
No, not at all. I couldn't finish it. I couldn't finish a film without being convinced of its structure or its ending. I was exhausted.

RS
If they'd waited for you to recover, if we'd followed through on our plan and then brought in an external eye to supervise the final cut, would the film have turned out differently?

RY
No. I couldn't keep going.

RS
I hate not finishing something I started. It really bothered me.

RY
I don't like dropping something I've started either, but I don't think we could have reached a cut that was convincing for me. We fundamentally disagreed.

RS

We didn't have time to reach an agreement on the edit.

RY

There was no time.

RS

But I do think that if we'd followed our plan—how long did it take them to finish the final cut in the end?

RY

Five weeks.

RS

I think it needed one more month of editing. It wasn't ready yet.

RY

Even now, I still feel it's unfinished. But I'm not upset that I didn't get through to the end. Not at all.

RS

I'm still dissatisfied, because I know the rushes and I feel, if we had more time, it would have been—

RY

—a more important film.

RS

It needed that little push.

RY

I still have no regrets. I was exhausted by the end; I couldn't go on. I had burnout.

6. INT. BEIT EL MADINA OR SMIRNA – NIGHT

(Pause. Rania and Raya eat Lebanese sandwiches and french fries as they watch an antifascist demonstration pass by.)

7. INT. BAR TIER – NIGHT

7.1 (ENDINGS)

RS

What's your overall assessment of your experience then?

RY

I learned a lot with Bidayyat. While I was there, it was impossible to take a step back. Now that I'm in Germany, I'm starting to understand what happened.

RS

Did it make you into an editor?

RY

I still don't consider myself a professional editor. I could become one with time, if I pursue it further. I have the basics, and I have some experience, but I wonder if I'm capable of editing a film that's not about Syria or the region. If I have to edit a film about Germany, in another language, in another culture, would I become an editor? Or was I one because I was editing films about my own culture and history?

7.2 (ALICE & MONTAGE)

RS

You told me that you like *Alice in Wonderland* because it's like montage.

RY

It's exactly like montage. You take a path, but you don't know whether or not the story will work. It can take months before you discover that it's not the right path. You also discover that you and the director are like Alice and the Rabbit [*laughter*], and sometimes the producer is one of the characters . . .

RS

The Queen: "Off with her head!"

(laughter)

7.3 (APPRENTICESHIP)

RY

There's this river of tears, it reminds me of this bar we're in now, Tier. Maybe that's why I brought you here. You have these strange animals standing here, like in *Alice*.

RS

Are you sad that the Bidayyat experience came to an end?

RY

Yes.

RS

The revolution is over!

RY

Everything ended at the same time.

RS

The funders stopped funding these types of projects in Lebanon, dedicated to Syrians, even though we opened up to Lebanese and Palestinians.

RY

It was a nice project. But they didn't organize a single editing workshop. Bidayyat focused on directing. But they weren't real directors.

RS

What would you call them then?

RY

Apprentices, like me. I don't consider myself an editor yet, so they shouldn't consider themselves directors yet. We're all still learning.

RS

Image-makers maybe, rather than film-makers?

RY

Possibly. I'll see if I can edit here, in Germany. I don't know.

RS

Of course you can. Montage is a skill, a tool to resolve an enigma, the enigma of images. So you can use it outside your own culture. It's like learning sculpture or painting: it's a skill. I consider myself an artisan. I do everything myself, with my hands.

RY

I won't drop it. I want to continue but not in the same way. Not in the same way. The last film I edited was Afraa's second film, *All Roads Lead to More* (2022). It was on Syrians again, but Syrians here in Berlin: four women, refugees, with different stories about life here in Germany. It hasn't come out yet.

RS

What about Zeina Qahwaji's film, *Sugar Cage* (2019)?

RY

That was the last film I edited in Beirut, but it wasn't a Bidayyat film.

RS

In the end, everyone left. Everyone's in Europe: Sara's in Austria; Afraa's in Berlin, Avo too; Zeina's in Belgium, Saeed's in Leipzig, Orwa's in Berlin . . .

RY

I was the last one to leave.

RS

You barely made it. You came out at the right time.

RY

I came because Zeina invited me to present her film in Leipzig. I stayed and applied for asylum.

RS

Good on her.

7.4 (A COLLECTIVE MEMORY)

RY

Often people asked me, “Why don’t you work on something light or fun, something young like you? Make music videos!” Maybe I was taking psychological risks by exposing myself to trauma and then repeating it with the next filmmaker, over and over again, all for the sake of their stories. They would come and then leave, and I would stay. Eight feature films with Bidayyat that weren’t mine, but that concerned me directly. Why was I doing that? Because I wanted us to have a collective memory, not only for supporters of the revolution, but for all Syrians, really.

RS

Isn’t that political? A political gesture?

RY

It’s my philosophy, it’s my point of view.

RS

Bidayyat is one of the repositories of the memory of what happened in Syria—and now it’s gone. Where do we go now?

RY

Now the younger generation, the generation that doesn’t know what happened, will search for a place to find these films. But for the time being, there’s nowhere you can find all these films. I don’t even have the links myself.

(laughter)

7.5 (NIHAYYAT)

RY

Maybe it’s time for us to forget what we lived. I don’t want to work on this subject anymore. I did what I did. I have no more energy to edit another Syrian story. But where will all these films go?

RS

I don’t know. It’s a real question. Where will this archive go? Bidayyat’s archive is still there in Beirut. What will happen to it now? Maybe it should go to some kind of museum or foundation that can preserve the memory of this historic time in Syria.

RY

What more can we say about Bidayyat? [*Bidayyat* means “beginnings” in Arabic.—Ed.]

RS

That now it’s *Nihayyat* [“endings”] . . .

(laughter)