

Intimate Exile

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In a scene from *Our Terrible Country* (Ali Atassi, Ziad Homsy, 2014) the dismay in Yassin al-Haj Saleh's expression is palpable. Filmed from behind while he strolls through the streets of Istanbul, the committed intellectual ruminates on his first experiences of exile. In a voiceover, al-Haj Saleh explains that despite the regime's "brutality" Syria remains *his* country. It's the only country he knows, and yet he plunges into the unknown. By following al-Haj Saleh's journey and his decision to leave Douma, then Raqqa, and finally Syria, *Our Terrible Country* raises questions about both the situation in the country and the role of intellectuals in political struggle: How did it come to this? What has he left behind? Will he be "useful" in the aftermath of exile?

Alongside exile, *Our Terrible Country* points to another central issue: the relation between generations. The documentary ends up focusing, largely by chance, on the relationship between the young codirector, Ziad Homsy, and the main character, Yassin al-Haj Saleh. The former engages in the revolt, at times as a violent struggle, at others as a media activist, while the latter writes, theorizes, represents. In part through Homsy, al-Haj Saleh discovers the centrality of young people and the marginality of an older generation of intellectuals to the Syrian revolution. In fact, halfway through, Ziad Homsy shifts from codirector to character after Mohammad Ali Atassi travels clandestinely across the Turkish border into Raqqa to film. In this sense, Atassi, the founder of Bidayyat, assumes the role of a mediator between two very different generations of activists.

Atassi's role in the film crystallizes what Bidayyat as an organization has embodied for almost ten years: a space for exchange between generations of Syrians, which allows for the construction

of narratives of the Syrian revolution and war in exile. More specifically, Bidayyat has supported a group of filmmakers who share some formal and stylistic elements and who largely share political commitments; but is that sufficient to constitute a generation? The question of what constitutes a generation opens up onto three related issues: What are the institutional structures that contributed to the formation of Bidayyat as a Syrian organization in exile, and how did those structures in turn contribute to the formation of a group of young filmmakers? What limits does a sociological theory of generations place on the question of artistic subjectivity, and how might those limits conversely find expression in their films? And finally, within a tradition of Syrian cinema, how might a theory of generations drawn from intellectual history address concerns about the limits of artistic subjectivity, as well as the relations between different and successive generations?

As the revolution militarized in response to the Syrian regime's repression, the spaces available for artistic expression became increasingly constrained inside Syria.¹ Artists and filmmakers were among the hundreds of thousands of Syrians forced into exile, passing through either Lebanon or Turkey. As one result of this mass forced migration, the Lebanese capital became a gathering place for young filmmakers, artists, and other cultural workers. In 2013, Bidayyat began to offer those gathered in exile the possibility to either begin or continue their documentary filmmaking.

For a period, Beirut became one of the centers of Syrian cultural production. Various other Syrian cultural associations

were founded in the city, including Ettijahat and Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution. In Beirut, Bidayyat also built links with local, regional, and international institutions, associations, foundations, and festivals in order to finance and distribute its films. These links included production partnerships with the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC), the Screen Institute Beirut (SIB), and the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Bidayyat also used its base in Beirut to implement a series of international coproductions, in particular with Films de Force Majeure for its later feature documentaries *Little Palestine* (Abdallah al-Khatib, 2021) and *Still Recording* (Saeed al-Batal, Ghiath Ayoub, 2018), which made wider distribution of the films possible, including on DVD.

Despite being an important site for Syrian cultural production, the Lebanese state had long inflicted a series of hostile policies and practices on Syrian refugees, leading to multiple waves of migration from Lebanon to Europe in the years that followed the 2011 uprising. From 2019 on, Lebanon became even more precarious for Syrian artists in exile. The country was plunged into turmoil by a political, economic, and banking crisis, not to mention the huge explosion in the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020. In the wake of Lebanon's crises, another wave of Syrian filmmakers left Beirut for Europe, especially Germany. As an added blow to independent filmmaking, the only art house cinema in Beirut, Metropolis Cinema, was forced to close. (Incidentally, Metropolis Cinema was where *Our Terrible Country* was first screened, in collaboration with the Heinrich Böll Foundation, on October 7, 2014.)

Beirut wasn't only a site for post-production and distribution in exile; it also featured prominently in many of

Bidayyat's films as a place with multiple layers of signification, with the city itself becoming a leitmotif for recurring experiences of exile in multiple Bidayyat documentaries. In *Houses without Doors* (Avo Kaprealian, 2016), Beirut is a place of refuge. Yet it's a peculiar refuge. The arrival of the director and his family in Bourj Hammoud, Beirut's Armenian neighborhood, appears as yet a further stage in an exodus that began with the Armenian genocide at the dawn of the twentieth century, when his family found refuge in Aleppo. Beirut is reduced to the apartment where the director and his family move about, just as Kaprealian captured the conflict from the balcony of their claustrophobic apartment in Aleppo.

In *On the Edge of Life* (Yaser Kassab, 2017), Beirut is a place of transit. The city first appears in a long sequence shot at night through the back window of a cab driving the director and his girlfriend from Damascus to Beirut, the city moving through the frame. In the following scenes, Beirut is repeatedly represented through similar fixed shots, framing the same place at different times of the day, paradoxically underlining Kassab's feeling of immobility and expectation of imminent migration. Shots of Beirut's corniche and the sea presage this elsewhere, the same sea the director and his companion will eventually have to cross to reach Europe. Kassab's final passage through the Lebanese capital is marked by absence and mourning. The director looks at his brother's portrait on a phone screen, the call to prayer in the background sounding like a funeral song.

Finally, a sense of confinement is apparent in *Resurrection* (Orwa Al Mokdad, 2018), where Beirut appears as a place of blockage. The director, who had his identity documents confiscated by Lebanese authorities, was unable to

leave the country. Forced to remain in this intimate exile, outside Syria but still within touching distance, Al Mokdad reappropriates the nightmares of the Lebanese Civil War in the film.

While offering an institutional structure for film production and distribution, Beirut also became the material out of which Bidayyat's filmmakers could build their narratives in and of exile.

Young Syrians who constituted the majority of protesters in 2011, according to geographer Leïla Vignal, "experienced a triple—demographic, educational and urban—transition."² This includes many of the young filmmakers who produced films through Bidayyat. But to what extent is it accurate to speak of these filmmakers collectively as a new generation? The sociologist Karl Mannheim argues that one should "speak of a generation as an actuality only where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization."³ I turn to his work on the sociology of intellectual history to begin to assess the accuracy of speaking in terms of a *generation* of Syrian filmmakers.

The directors of the films produced by Bidayyat, and other Syrian directors of roughly the same age or "generation," are certainly marked by Syrian revolution and war. But to what extent were bonds established by this common experience? Mannheim argues that what constitutes a "generational unit" does not "merely involve a loose participation by a number of individuals in a pattern of events shared by all alike though interpreted by the different individuals differently, but an identity of responses, a certain affinity

in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences.”⁴

It is difficult to measure to what extent 2011 as an *event* orients the work of the filmmakers, writers, and artists supported by Bidayyat, or the extent to which these individuals constitute a homogeneous “generational unity.” However, the directors whose films were produced by Bidayyat certainly shared common experiences. They observed the conflict through their cameras without the authorization of the regime or the usual official channels that predated 2011. In doing so, they found themselves in an illegal situation, even more so when filming in the regime-controlled areas. Most were forced to leave Syria because of the repression and militarization of the uprising. Thus, the majority of Bidayyat filmmakers shared the experience of exile.

But according to Mannheim’s concept of a generation, it would still be premature to consider these common experiences as constituting a “generational unity,” if only because the filmmakers do not necessarily perceive their engagement through the image in the same way. In addition to Mannheim’s theorization, it might also be relevant to consider the filmmakers’ responses, their acts of representing the conflict, as a matrix of more or less similar experiences that outgrow the dimensions of the different pathways at stake. From this point of view, it’s important to consider how directors question themselves in relation to their work, how they integrate a reflexive dimension into their treatment of conflict, and, in particular, how they position themselves in relation to the work of their elders.

Through a relational approach, David Scott has drawn on Mannheim to consider the “temporality of *intellectual* generations.” By “teas[ing] out some of the implication of the fact that generations

are successive and continuous as well as overlapping and co-temporal,” Scott develops a relational conception of generations.⁵ In particular, he explores how the relations between successive generations can be characterized by tensions resulting from each generation’s different relationship to the past, present, and future.⁶ In this relational conception of generations, which attempts to consider both continuity and difference, Scott draws on Talal Asad’s concept of a “discursive tradition”:

If the idea of intellectual generation names the temporally constituted social and existential location of cohorts of individuals sharing roughly similar founding experience, the idea of a discursive tradition names the dramatic and agonistic narrative through which such successive and overlapping generations give embodied point to the normative virtues of moral-political worldviews that make them distinctive.⁷

Generations, thus, are the means through which traditions are embodied and lived through time, while, for Scott, the practice of “criticism” represents a mode of relating to a set of inherited practices, struggles, worldviews, and virtues.⁸ Although Scott’s essay focuses on intellectuals, I transpose it here to filmmaking, itself a form of intellectual production. Indeed, for the filmmakers produced by Bidayyat, their films are often positioned in relation to their elders as much as they are to the conflict.

What characteristics do the young filmmakers produced by Bidayyat share? First of all, they felt an urgent need to document the conflict, to understand what was happening in Syria in 2011 *through images*. In an interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the director Saeed al-Batal explains that, from the beginning of the uprising, filming was a way to make himself useful. In the same interview, however, he claims that this urgency is accompanied by a moral duty that could

only be fulfilled by cinema, which he contrasts to YouTube clips and other user-generated content posted online.⁹

Two elements potentially constitute a unity of response among the young filmmakers. First, there are the moral issues mentioned by Saeed al-Batal, which I believe are addressed via, among other things, the reflexive dimension found in many of Bidayyat's documentaries, as well as in recent Syrian documentary more broadly. Second, there's the prevalence of documentary itself, which can be explained in part by the external constraints of the conflict, as well as by an active rejection of fiction.

As Orwa Al Mokdad explains in an article published on Bidayyat's website, the aversion to fiction itself derives from moral and ethical concerns:

I would like to make a romantic film, a traditional love story, one that enchants viewers. A story about how a heroine rescues her lover and declares the war to be over. As I walk through the ruins, I think: creating a "war location" wouldn't be that hard, perhaps costly production-wise. My dream is to make a fiction film. When I shot my documentary *300 Miles*, I tried to create fictional characters to give viewers the impression that they were watching a fiction film. Fiction films are more convincing and everlasting. In them, viewers inhabit the characters of the heroes, sharing every detail of their lives. But I do not have that luxury. Death is the only hero and we are characters in a film that has yet to end.¹⁰

By contrast with Al Mokdad, many Syrian directors, especially of satellite TV series, remained in Syria and continued their work in dramatic narrative fiction, such as satellite TV dramas (*musalsalat*).¹¹ Preceding the satellite TV directors who made popular fictions with controlled criticism was a generation of filmmakers, among them Ossama Mohammed and Mohamad Malas, funded by the National Film Organization (NFO) to make allegorical films. As Stefan Tarnowski

has recently argued in this journal, the shifts from NFO-funded feature films to satellite TV fictions and finally to the documentaries produced by Bidayyat are the mediatic forms that mark generational change.¹²

But as with the generation of NFO-funded cinema, the "enrollment of film practice" (*enrôlement de la pratique cinématographique*) inherent in documentary also allowed filmmakers to move away from the pure and instantaneous rendition of events.¹³ In the 1980s and 1990s, directors would delve into their memories and personal histories to set their films, generally fiction films, in Syria's recent past so as to avoid censorship, as Mohamad Malas did in his celebrated fiction film *The Night* (1992).¹⁴ The difference, however, is that directors filming after 2011 treat events subjectively and through individual narratives. This, perhaps, represents a generational difference. Post-2011 directors of documentaries also mobilize their personal and family histories to deal with what is *currently* happening in Syria. While Omar Amiralay once used a series of subtle editing strategies to express his critical opinions toward the regime's policies indirectly and implicitly, as in *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* (1974), post-2011 Syrian filmmakers have made that criticism markedly more explicit and direct.

After 2011, directors no longer position themselves in relation to censorship. They make films about the 2011 uprising and the political horizons it opened up or shut off. Their first consideration is of the risks and dangers they take in filming during a conflict, such as whether an area is fully controlled by the regime or marked by fighting. To deal with the uprising in their films, these young directors turned to processes that, pre-2011, were only implicit in some films. After 2011,

these processes of documentary making became explicit and central, as filmmakers were no longer forced to submit to censorship. Under contextual constraints, the filmmakers incorporated a reflexive dimension into their documentary practices as well as into moral issues, as exemplified by Saeed al-Batal. In particular, the question of how to deal with the conflict without falling into voyeurism recurred, a question tackled throughout *Still Recording*.

The reflexive dimension is expressed through what has been called an “I-voice” (*voix-je*).¹⁵ This I-voice doesn’t signify omniscience but rather the expression of doubt. Moreover, it allows the filmmaker to restore a state of mind, to share an emotion with the spectator while organizing the story across a physical or spiritual journey.¹⁶ The I-voice is evidenced in Bidayyat-produced documentaries, including *300 Miles* (Orwa Al Mokdad, 2016), *194. Us, Children of the Camp* (Samer Salameh, 2017), and *Taste of Cement* (Ziad Kalthoum, 2017).

But the I-voice was never entirely absent pre-2011, as evidenced in particular by Hala Al Abdalla’s oeuvre. The difference is that post-2011, the I-voice becomes systematic, an explicit means for producing statements on the country’s political situation. The “I” carries this story of transformation, occupying a central place. Moreover, in some documentaries (*300 Miles*; *Taste of Cement*; *194. Us, Children of the Camp*; *Little Palestine*), the I-voice often addresses a personal “you,” introducing a dialectical dimension. The voiceover can underline the absence of missing friends, but it is also integrated into film structures that rely on exchange.¹⁷ The most striking and developed example is Orwa Al Mokdad’s *300 Miles*. Sequences filmed in Aleppo in which Al Mokdad addresses his niece

Nour in voiceover are answered, in turn, by sequences filmed in Deraa in which she addresses the director.

This dialectical dimension is articulated reflexively, allowing the director to question him- or herself and to be questioned in relation to their practice. This questioning of their practice also involves exchanges and even confrontations with their elders—across generations—including within the framework of Bidayyat. We can thus see that a generation is also built through interaction—both exchange and confrontation.

From this perspective, the generational dimension appears as much in the positioning of the young directors vis-à-vis the political situation as in their relationship with the structures of documentary film production. These young directors find themselves in a dual situation, both influenced by and distancing themselves from directors active pre-2011. Bidayyat organized numerous workshops and training sessions with experienced directors, filmmakers, and film professionals already active before 2011, such as Ghassan Salhab, Marcel Khalife, Joude Gorani, and Rania Stephan. As an organization, Bidayyat has played the role of facilitator, allowing the emergence of a creative space where young directors with different visions have been able to conceive documentaries from a variety of film materials (pre- and post-2011 footage; images filmed in Syria; footage shot in Lebanon, Turkey, Europe; as well as archival footage). But the films of the young directors express both the influence of an older generation and a necessary distance to assert their own I-voice, which, I’m arguing, is a generational trait.

The role and oeuvre of Bidayyat’s founder and director Mohammad Ali Atassi in particular support this hypothesis. In his documentaries *Ibn*

al-Am (2001), *Ibn al-Am Online* (2012), and *Waiting for Abu Zaid* (2010), Atassi seeks above all to create a context, a space, in which exchange—and subsequently confrontation—can take place, at times actively intervening to catalyze exchange.

His codirected film *Our Terrible Country* constitutes a form of transition, because even though the director's I-voice intervenes in the film and participates in the dialectic, he is above all a sparring partner. In a scene set in a restaurant in Istanbul, Atassi becomes a go-between for two generations of dissidents, represented by the intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh and Atassi's young codirector, Ziad Homsí. These interactions and these tensions, at the onset of exile as well as during the gestation phases of the projects and in postproduction, contribute to the emergence of a group of directors, including Orwa Al Mokdad, Yaser Kassab, and Avo Kaprealian, which could be likened to the forms of generational exchange described by David Scott, simultaneously agonistic and sympathetic.

The themes of exchange across generations, collaborative and combative, is made both explicit and metaphorical in Orwa Al Mokdad's *Resurrection*. The director appears in the film, addressing both his producer, Mohammad Ali Atassi, and his own inner ghosts through the voiceover. The film's hallucinatory narrative is a kind of descent into hell in order to question the Syrian conflict through cinema, which involves a form of emancipation for Al Mokdad, including from his influences.

Resurrection is a particularly enlightening example of the dialectical dimension of documentaries marked by an entanglement of memories. Indeed, Al Mokdad mixes his reminiscences of the Syrian conflict with the ghosts of the Lebanese Civil War through the haunting

figure of the late Lebanese director Maroun Bagdadi (1950–93), who died prematurely in an accidental fall, and the poet Khalil Hawi (1919–82), who took his own life during the Israeli invasion of Beirut.

Al Mokdad draws on a sequence in Maroun Bagdadi's film *Out of Life* (1991) in which a horse is shot in the middle of the street. In *Resurrection*, Al Mokdad is confronted by a hybrid creature with a human body and a horse's head. The creature, a figment of his imagination and a sort of waking nightmare, sits opposite the director, critiquing his work and confronting him with the question of whether he thinks of himself as a hero and savior.

Between 2013 and 2022, several characteristics of Syrian artistic creation in exile crystallized at Bidayyat. Never before had Syrians made so many documentaries in such a short period of time. And yet these films were rarely screened in Syria. While Bidayyat's location in Beirut guaranteed proximity to Syria, the influence of Bidayyat's documentaries was largely ensured by screenings at international festivals. Finally, these documentaries were produced with relatively small sums of money, especially compared to fiction films, but also in comparison to other contemporary documentaries being made about Syria. As a result, Bidayyat's production required the support of foundations, cultural institutions, and regional funders.

With Mohammad Ali Atassi at its helm, taking on the role of intermediary and interlocutor, Bidayyat constituted a laboratory that allowed a group—which could be considered a generation according to Scott's approach—to

construct the narrative of the Syrian conflict in exile. Bidayyat enabled young people either to continue their work as filmmakers or to become filmmakers.

These documentaries include a dimension that is both ethical and reflexive through the question of how to film the conflict. Moreover, the films share a strong dialectical dimension, a cinematic device that occupies a central place in the way the films are constructed at a distance. One may wonder to what extent this dialectical dimension is the result of Bidayyat's structure, which encouraged exchange over long periods of time, and in particular the long periods spent on the workshopping, editing, and postproduction of documentaries.

Does the shuttering of Bidayyat symbolize the end of an era of film production that focused on supporting young Syrians to make experimental documentaries? Today, the question of the evolution of Syrian cinematographic creation in exile remains: Will this production still be based on images from Syria, filmed in secret, once again in the face of censorship, perhaps sent abroad to a generation of filmmakers trained by Bidayyat to turn into creative documentaries? Or is it time to envisage another organization, perhaps similar to Bidayyat, but focusing instead on fiction?

Endnotes

- 1 On the militarization of the revolution, see Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorransoro, and Arthur Quesnay, *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). On artistic expression inside Syria, see Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto, 2016), 163–82.
- 2 Leïla Vignal, *War-Torn: The Unmaking of Syria, 2011–2021* (London: Hurst, 2021), 29.
- 3 Karl Mannheim, “The Sociological Problem of Generations,” in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), 182–83.
- 4 Mannheim, “Sociological Problem of Generations,” 186–87.
- 5 David Scott, “The Temporality of Generations: Dialogue, Tradition, Criticism,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 165.
- 6 Scott, “Temporality of Generations,” 172.
- 7 Scott, 176.
- 8 Scott, 176–77.
- 9 Cyril Béghin, “Jeunesse syrienne: entretien avec Saeed Al Batal et Ghiath Ayoub,” *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 753 (March 2019): 31.
- 10 Orwa Al Mokdad, “Cinema of Death,” Bidayyat, January 31, 2017, https://bidayyat.org/opinions_article.php?id=161#.YkVgz7g690s.
- 11 See Christa Salamandra, “Past Continuous: The Chronopolitics of Representation in Syrian Television Drama,” *Middle East Critique* 28, no. 2 (May 2019): 121–41.
- 12 Stefan Tarnowski, “Visible Records of a Definite Problem,” *World Records Journal* 6 (2022): 102–13.
- 13 Cécile Boëx, “La création cinématographique en Syrie à la lumière du mouvement de révolte: nouvelles pratiques, nouveaux récits,” *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, no. 134 (2013): 152.
- 14 Elisabeth Léqueret, “La génération perdue du cinéma syrien,” *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 543 (February 2000): 49–50.
- 15 Antony Fiant, “Entre subjectivité et narration: la voix-off dans quelques documentaires français contemporains,” *Cahiers de Narratologie*, no. 20 (2011), <https://journals.openedition.org/narratologie/6346>.
- 16 Fiant, “Entre subjectivité et narration,” subsec. 2.
- 17 Anaïs Farine, “In Dark Times: Epistolary Films for Absent Friends,” Ettijahat, 2020, accessed April 6, 2023, <https://www.ettijahat.org/page/1141>.

