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ABOUNADARRA: The Right to the Image

What is a revolution? If you ask Charif Kiwan, the exiled Syrian and one of three named members of Abounaddara, he would answer that, in the case of Syria, it is a demand for dignity.

Who are the Revolutionaries?

Abounadarra is an anonymous collective of self-taught Syrian filmmakers, who since 2010, have been on a mission to “...*make films that reflected all of Syrian civil society...*” and to tell “*the stories of ordinary men and women, of workers and artisans*” (Kiwan). Facing rejection by producers and broadcasters uninterested in a Syrian story not “*concerned mainly with geopolitics or exotic themes, and... films carrying well known narratives, often about Bashar al-Assad or Islam against modernity or the fight against Israel*” (Kiwan), the initial group of self-funded filmmakers began to release a short video every Friday on their Facebook page via Vimeo, documenting ordinary life in nascent revolutionary Syria.

As the Arab Spring made its way into their country, protest turned into revolution and one of the recurring chants of the crowds became “*karameh, karameh, karameh!*”

[dignity, dignity, dignity!]. Speaking on behalf of the collective, Kiwan says “*we felt that, as filmmakers, we had the responsibility to honor that call*” (Kiwan).

The subjects that the Collective portrays are ordinary citizens approached in different scenarios by a host of dispersed filmmakers and citizen journalists, some of whom are affiliated with the group and others who simply contribute to the work. Abounaddara deliberately removes context from most of their videos, choosing to use their art as a way to redefine Syrians as a community of individuals, rather than allowing the viewer to classify their subject as a part of any sect or affiliation. In an attempt to simply reflect the community back to itself (and to the wider community of viewers), many different opinions are depicted – both supporters of the regime and of the Free Syria Army, Syrians of different religions and social strata, men, women and children. Not all videos are shot in Syria, although all subjects are Syrians (Kiwan and Zaatari).

During a recent conference at The New School in New York (heretofore referred to as ‘the Conference’ in this paper), honoring their work as recipients of the Vera List Centre Prize for Art and Politics, Kiwan elaborated, “*we attempt to translate the word ‘dignity’ into film... by obliging the viewer to see the Syrians as people... When you suppress the humanity of people, you accept their death... Resistance (to us) means showing the face of the people.*”

Dignity

“If you're not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing.” – Malcom X

If there is a politics driving the work of Abounadarra, it is the politics of representation. In one of the more powerful exchanges during the Conference, Kiwan reframed the media depiction of the Syrian revolution as a battle for self-representation. Abounadarra's portraiture of Syrians as ordinary people living through an extraordinary time, with all the complexities of the moment represented on film, is a deliberate contrast to the 'undignified' representation of their countrymen as either passive victims or fanatic savages; targets of brutality or purveyors of death.

"We want to address the injustice of the images circulating in the dominant media; the indignity of the images of Syrians as victims, dead and mutilated, or shouting, angry, in the streets. But, always, we see the criminal Bashar al-Assad in a suit, composed and dignified" – Charif Kiwan.

It is the belief of the Collective that this imagery has "*contributed to the banalization of evil instead of rendering it unbearable*" (Abounadarra), desensitizing the international community to the plight of Syrian civilians. In turn, they contend that these images have empowered the Assad regime, as well as the Islamic State, both of which have a clear idea of the politics of image that they would like to impose.

The Collective's deeply held belief that there is an inherent ethical responsibility of 'image makers' and professional journalists to shun the 'spectacle of abasement' (Abounadarra) – the disseminating of horrific images of people suffering in war as an instrument of '*the pornography of suffering*' (Cottle and Nolan) or journalistic voyeurism disguised as reporting – has led them to be campaigners for the recognition of a new human right – the right to the image (Abounadarra).

Ronald Dworkin, a philosopher and United States constitutional law and jurisprudence scholar, is quoted in the Abounadarra concept paper discussing their theory of a right to the image as saying: *“every person is entitled to equal concern and respect in the design of the structure of society”* (Abounaddara). The Collective believes that this belief is central to modern society and is the legal and ethical basis for the proposed human right to one’s image. Abounaddara postulate that the right already lives within existing international human rights law, alluding to the right to privacy and the right to freedom of opinion and expression (Abounaddara). What they are calling for is a clear articulation of this right in international law, and in the absence of that, recognition of its existence by the dominant international media, as regards *“the representation of persons and groups reduced to ‘bare life’ in wars, human rights abuses and other similar situations”* (Abounaddara).

An Alternative Media

“Faced with the spectacle of abasement, however, we, image makers, cannot escape our ethical responsibilities, particularly when the media industry has failed to assume its own.” – Abanoudarra Collective

Despite continually referring to themselves as filmmakers and the implication of being ‘merely’ artists encased in that language, it is clear that their mission is journalistic. In their declared purpose as an alternative imagining of Syrian society during the revolution and creators of a new portrait of the Syrian civil war, as seen through the eyes of the average Syrian, they are directly challenging the dominant media. In statements

made publicly, Charif Kiwan, in his role as spokesperson for Abounaddara, has articulated their objection to the mainstream media depiction of the war. Kiwan said, in a 2014 article penned for the US publication Newsweek, *“(t)elelevision is now in the process of inventing ‘war as seen from inside’. This novel approach is radically overturning standard news-reporting protocols by the media since the Vietnam War: reporting is no longer based on images created by professional correspondents but by images taken by local anonymous sources intended for social media... their low information value is matched by high emotional value...”* (Kiwan).

Dominant media outlets have argued that they have no alternative to the images being posted on social media. The Syrian revolution is now the third most dangerous location in the world for reporters to work, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CJP), with over 85 journalists having been killed in the conflict since it began in 2011 (Committee To Protect Journalists). As a result, almost all foreign journalists have left Syria, and as the fighting intensifies, in some instances, it is no longer safe to report even from the borders (Gelling). Native Syrian journalists have been under significant threat, without easy means with which to escape the violence – both the inherent violence of living and reporting from a war zone and the targeted violence directed at journalists by the various factions in the war (Committee To Protect Journalists).

In an interview with PBS Newshour that aired in 2014, Deborah Amos of NPR and John Daniszewski of the Associated Press (AP) articulated logistical concerns facing journalistic organizations in reporting from Syria, apart from the important security concerns detailed above. The Bashar al-Assad regime has terminated any visa class for

US citizens, making it impossible for US journalists, at least, to be in the country legally (Daniszewski and Amos). Of course, the challenge is also verification of information – while even Abounaddara acknowledge that there is much information coming out of Syria in the form of citizen journalism, much of it is difficult to verify. This observation led Daniszewski to remark *“(w)e’re relying in this conflict, I think to a greater extent than ever, on user-generated content, social media, the photos that people there send out.”* He does qualify this, however, perhaps anticipating criticism, by going on to say, *“...we have very high standards which of these we will use and how we verify them”* (Daniszewski and Amos).

Abounadarra is strongly critical of the use of these images, despite understanding the plight of the news organizations. While speaking of television broadcasting in response to this phenomenon, Kiwan’s criticism also applies to print media. He writes, *“Television networks behave as if they had no choice but to broadcast these images, as they create buzz online. They do so claiming their duty to inform, but also to maintain their edge – as a slice of the advertising market in the face of fierce competition from social media... in fact these images are shot by stakeholders in the conflict, anonymous people... who want to defend a cause... ‘war from the inside’ offers television an opportunity to indulge its viewers’ voyeuristic urges without adhering to journalistic, legal or ethical guidelines as they relate to a person’s right to his or her own image... It gives television permission to exhibit bodies that have been murdered or humiliated on the simple pretext that it is the Syrians themselves who create these images”* (Kiwan).

He ends his article imploring the mainstream media to engage in the practice of informing without the need to disrespect the human dignity of Syrians, reminding them

that no images of dead victims were televised in the aftermath of the attacks on the United States of September 11 2001.

Conclusion: Stop the Spectacle

Abounaddara represents a brave and bold endeavor by these independent Syrian filmmakers to define for themselves how to be represented. In challenging the international dominant media to re-think their use of the images of the marginalized, the victimized and those surviving humanitarian crises, they claim to be standing up for the rights of not just ordinary Syrians, but also on behalf of humanity.

But by using the relatively new tools of the Internet and established international platforms like Facebook and Vimeo, they are able to bypass the mainstream media and produce a self-determined portrait of Syria in a time of crisis. Importantly, they are fighting to maintain the dignity of the image of Syrians as a humanitarian tool, working under the premise that those whom the international community can still identify with as ‘fellow humans’ will invoke in us a reaction and a duty to protect.

Despite ongoing questions about what a right to the image would mean, it is hard to argue that the conversation about the media representation of people in crises is unnecessary. Victims of tragedy are almost always afforded dignified representation when they, too, are from the west. Surely this is an implicit recognition by the dominant western media that, even if informally, a right to respectful and dignified media representation is significant and respected, albeit non-uniformly.

Perhaps, then, Abounaddara is simply calling for a right already afforded to others to be respected for Syrians.

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