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# **Poetics of Historical Contemplation With Syria and its Diaspora:** An Interview with Hala Alabdalla

**By Basil Alsubee**

Translated from Arabic to English by Basil AlSubee

**I met and spoke with Hala Alabdalla, Syrian documentary filmmaker currently based in Paris, regarding her most recent film, *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence* (2021). The film serves as a personal message to one of Hala's oldest friends, the late Omar Amiralay, a pioneering documentary filmmaker and long-time critic of the Syrian regime who passed away a month before the unfolding of the revolutionary moment of 2011.**

Taking *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence* as a constantly resurfacing point of departure, Hala Alabdallah and I explore various topics pertaining to cinema and politics within and beyond Syria. By the end of our conversation, we felt a strong kinship in our thinking about the relationship between politics, poetics, and fostering collectivity in times of loss.

The first part of our conversation centers around Hala's relationship to the documentary form, starting with her first film as a director, *I Am the One Who Carries the Flowers to Her Grave* (2006) and moving along to her most recent film, Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence. Hala's documentary films could be distinguished by her insistence on a revelatory honesty. In her own words this insistence cannot be separated from a personal and political choice to reject the common address of state and news documentary cinema, both in Syria and throughout the Arab world. Instead of the more clean and polished form of state and news documentary, Hala's experimental, poetically meditative style finds its artistic and political efficacy in its ability to capture the messiness of social entanglement, of both the subjects of her films and her audiences. Hala finds her freeform aesthetic to be a more honest and forthcoming way to be in community with the audiences of her films, whom she insists on characterizing as participants in her film projects rather than as spectators.

Hala's turn away from state and news documentary aesthetics in the Arab world carries more than a simplistic call for documentarian truth-telling—it comes from a keen awareness about the systemic invisibility created at the hands of the Syrian state, an overwhelming silence briefly overturned in 2011. When thinking about the modern history of images in Syria, Hala does not simply critique the singular portrait of Assad as ruler in Syria, but points to the silences hiding beneath this singular image. These silences make the singular image of the ruler possible to begin with: such as silence around the 1982 massacre in Hala's hometown of Hama, or the realities unfolding in the brutal secrecy of Syrian prisons. If state violence in Syria is then understood as an act of creating invisibility, 2011 becomes significant not simply as a moment of uprising, but also as a moment of de-invisibilizing.

After a brief discussion of this history, the second section of our conversation is grounded in the political present, over a decade removed from 2011 and in a time when most Syrians find themselves reckoning with the immensity of loss. For both Hala and me, making sense of our political present and intervening in it seems impossible without an intergenerational process of historical contemplation and engagement with memory. As a result, throughout our conversation we find ourselves returning to the massive collection of sound and image fragments from before and after 2011 which would have remained largely inaccessible if not for that revolutionary moment.

From there, the third section of our conversation offers a historical and autobiographical deep dive into Hala's relationships with political organizing and ciné clubs. We speak a bit about Hala's relationship with Omar Amiralay as well as her involvements with the Damascus Ciné Club and the Marxist Labor Party in 1970s Syria. Hala directly traces her choice to pursue filmmaking back to the ethos of collective organizing she developed in both of these spaces. By rooting her own artistic trajectory in her participation in both the Marxist Labor Party and the Damascus Ciné Club, she emphasizes the importance of nurturing collectivity in all of her film projects.

It is particularly poignant to think about Hala's ethos of collectivity today in light of the vastness of the Syrian diaspora—the subject of the fourth and final part of our conversation. Here, Hala speaks about her earliest days after migrating to Paris, working in cinema between Syria and France, and how she became particularly drawn to poetry as a means of "building bridges between souls." Our conversation comes full circle as Hala speaks about the political and social necessity of intergenerational exchange within the large Syrian diaspora, and the role she sees for poetry in that exchange.

Over the course of our conversation about *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence*, Hala Alabdallah and I pivot around a recurring question: how can cinema create a collective space for political and social engagement in a time of loss over a decade removed from 2011? Thanks to Hala's own cinematic efforts and her ability to generate a revelatory poetics, viewers are able to meditate on that question as they revisit the rare intimate scenes she filmed with her late friend and colleague Omar Amiralay. Today, Amiralay's work and life trajectory remain deeply compelling for many generations throughout the Arab world who view his documentary cinema in a new light, especially in the wake of 2011. In turn, Hala Alabdallah's poetic documentary form provides us with openings that allow us to be collectively present with Omar Amiralay, as well as with history, memory, and pain, in spite of incomprehensibly distant geographies.

Hala Alabdalla's first film, *I Am the One Who Carries the Flowers to Her Grave*, is available online, and you can watch it through this link.

## Section I: Resistance and Revelatory Honesty in Hala Alabdallah's Documentary Form

**BA: Yesterday, while speaking with some friends about your first film *I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave* (2006), we brought up the amount of off-screen labor that created the possibility for producing the film to begin with. The film could not be possible, for example, without intimate relationships, the insights of age, and your own personal life trajectory with all the hope and despair that it contains. The result is a deeply personal film that you have since described as "a piece of your soul." Your latest film, *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence* (2021), is not very different in that sense—it's as personal to you as it is unquestionably political. *Omar Amiralay* positions the spectator as an intruder into an intimate meeting between lifelong friends in a strange space between life and death. In doing so, the film relies on an active narration addressing the audience and including them into the intimate scene. Is there a reason why you felt it was necessary to produce a film that created public memory of a dialogue between you, Omar, and an audience? Who did you imagine to be the audience for such a film?**

**HA:** Before speaking about *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence*, I want to start first with some general comments on *I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave* because I want to underline an important aspect of your comment. When most people watch personal documentary films that feel closer to everyday life, they assume that we simply and haphazardly cut together clips and photos from our everyday lives and called it a day. This is a consequence of visual culture in our region—when I teach cinema to young people today, I usually have to emphasize the importance of challenging the way they view documentary cinema. This is because documentary cinema has largely been taken over by state propaganda and news channels that keep our relationship with documentary cinema in the region

in a state of underdevelopment. As a result, large numbers of documentary films in our region are unjustly neglected in my view, even among audiences who consider themselves more invested in cinema. In the past ten years however, because of the uprisings throughout the Arab world, many changes have occurred in how audiences relate to documentary images.

*I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave* is a film that took many long years of labor, years that I enjoyed tremendously and look back on very fondly. It still gives me great joy to hear of people watching the film today. In fact, I consider the film to be a personal metric which I use to gauge how adventurous I can get as a filmmaker with every new project. At the same time, as I begin all my future adventures, I remain aware that an audience will receive the film as an end product, which brings us to the question of the spectator. When I think of the question of the spectator, I actually immediately turn to the Syrian spectator who has been condemned to a regime of censorship. Why do I turn specifically to censorship? Because in our context in Syria, the National Film Organization sponsors films to be created only to be then left on dusty shelves and never seen by anyone. The idea of a film being made and never seen causes me a lot of pain and anger because I think the exhibition of a film—allowing for communication with an audience—is just as crucial as any component of creating a film. I know that these days the viewer is able to find all kinds of films in the world in spite of all censorship, but for me a beautiful dream remains: that I could exhibit my films in Syria and move across cities and villages to hear people's reactions and to start discussions with them and learn from them. Do I not have the right to this simple dream?

My views on exhibition and spectatorship were actually among my main differences with Omar, who cared more about creating new films irrespective of whether or not a viewer could engage immediately with the film. In fact, Omar did not take initiative to send his films to film festivals or private screenings after they were initially screened on French television channels. He was simply not too concerned with this part of a film's life, and its ongoing relationship with a spectator. I would consider myself to hold the opposite view. While I don't actively imagine an audience member

over my shoulder dictating all the decisions I make as a filmmaker, I still have a deep desire to be transparent and honest with my audience, and to build bridges and weave threads with the viewer through my films, and ask the viewer to cross the bridge or pull the thread in my direction. In fact, I would consider the audience member to be a friendly collaborator in creating the film. If they accept the invitation to collaborate, it would be of benefit to the film, and if they don't accept it, then that's their prerogative.

**BA: I am interested in this aesthetics of revelatory honesty that appears in your films. For example, both *I Am the One Who Carries the Flowers to Her Grave* and *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence* rely on footage that is typically left out of the final editing stage of most major films—in fact we could say that perhaps 75% of those films consist of footage of you changing the microphone and camera setups, for example, or of you receiving mocking remarks from the friends you are interviewing. This brings me to the question of the documentary genre of filmmaking, which you have long been engaged with, in ways that are similar and different from Omar's engagement with documentary. What brought you to documentary as a style of filmmaking to begin with?**

**HA:** I came to documentary from the world of politics, so documentary films for me have always been attached to the question of resistance, be it resistance against pain or fear or oppression. So my engagement with documentary cinema became a means of exploring how human beings can express their pain and anxiety. At the same time, by engaging with our pains through the process of filmmaking, we start a process of invigorating ourselves through communicating with ourselves and with others.

In the beginning of my engagement with documentary cinema this was much more important to me than art for its own sake, which is a stance that also cannot be separated from my own political upbringing as a child. Back then, I believed firmly, in a simplistic way perhaps, that having some kind of political commitment was an obligation of mine. This belief then took me to political organizations that were concerned with solidarity efforts and work in service of change, which were the same motivations that took

me to cinema to begin with, rather than a desire for fame or hopes of becoming a star who can exert control over others via the camera. I never held these ambitions, and still don't, because even today filmmaking feels to me like a responsibility.

At the same time, in the spirit of my youthful rebellion, I was very interested in breaking all boundaries in any work I do, and considered it important to destroy any frames or molds in documentary cinema. So instead of simply entering into a set mold for documentary cinema, I considered documentary to be my personal playground in which I can experiment, allowing the work to take me wherever it needs to take me without any limits or conditions. After I finished working on *I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave*, I felt that the films I wanted to make had accumulated inside of me with the accumulation of all my pains. So when people ask me why my films always make them cry, I say that I wish I could make a film about the sky and flowers and weddings, but as long as the conditions in our country are as they are, I feel that there are screams hiding within my insides, desperate to be released through the filmmaking process.

**BA: So creating films from a place of pain and sorrow is connected to resistance through filmmaking, which you also connect to the genre of documentary. But why strictly documentary? Do you think that documentary is inexplicably attached to political resistance in a way that a fictional film is not?**

**HA:** Of course not, I have worked in the past on many fictional films such as Ossama Mohammad's *Stars in Broad Daylight* and *Box of Life*, and Mohammad Malas's The Night, as well as many other French films. There are many different, important and necessary ways of creating resistant films, in the deepest sense of the word "resistance."

But for me personally, one of the important conditions that I consider a priority in my filmmaking is refusing to be tethered closely to any political or economic system or funding from any particular organization that could dictate the limits of my work. This is much easier to do when you are working with documentary rather than most genres of fiction films. I could express myself on a range of different issues with my own personal means which is exactly

what I did with *I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave* without the presence of a production team or actors that I would have otherwise needed to pay living wages. (Of course, I also enjoyed the collaboration and support of the director Ammar Beik in various stages of making the film.)

While we are on the subject, despite the fact that I cannot fully reject the category of "documentary" for my films, I prefer personally to think of them instead as "free films." None of my films follow the expected logics of documentary films, and the process of making them does not fit any predetermined criteria for documentary either. My creative process depends heavily on writing and experimenting with the filming process—it is only afterwards in the editing stage that I realize that the footage carries material that could be retroactively labeled as documentary. But the original conception of the films typically comes from a place of fiction—even *Omar Amiralay* takes the audience on an almost fictional trajectory. As a result, for me, the most important component of my films is freedom in writing and creating and revealing to the viewer, and this freedom for me is a more important descriptor for my work than that of documentary. But the price of this freedom is a feeling of isolation that is a result of attempting to create something commercially undesirable and that does not look much like most of the other films that are out there.

## Section II: Silencing and Making Visible, "The Image" in Syria

**BA: I want to stay a little bit with the relationship you've drawn between resistance and cinema but I will return later to what you have coined here as the "free film." You spoke in the past, and many others did as well, about the role played by images and filmmaking in service of resistance inside Syria, especially after the beginning of the revolution, and before it as well. Do you think that this political moment we are living, the moment in which *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence* is being screened, 11 years after the beginning of the revolution and after the displacement of more than half of Syria's population, is a new political moment that demands a new role for cinema in service of resistance?**

**HA:** Absolutely! The role of the arts vis-a-vis politics changes with the passing of every moment and every minute. If you ask me personally, at this exact moment of defeat, darkness, and shrinking horizons, I would say that poetry is the artistic language that affects me the most. I get a tremendous amount of pleasure from reading a good poem—it almost feels like a massage to my soul.

Yet I can also say without a doubt, and after having lived a long life, that cinema has proven that it holds a boundless amount of energy and power. What I mean by this statement is that cinema has and always will have a role to play at any given moment we are living in. In this moment in which we find ourselves broken and in a state of catastrophe, after having lost countless people to bombings, killings, and imprisonment, after having lost entire villages and parts of cities, and after all the massive energies and endless sacrifices that have been given to the revolution… In this moment of extreme tragedy that Syrians are living in, it only makes sense that we ask whether or not cinema has a role to play in times of suffocating darkness. Today, I

personally find myself holding onto my faith in cinema. In my opinion, cinema has a crucial role, just as any of the other art forms.

That role certainly looks different from the kind of cinema that young Syrian organizers produced in 2011. Back then, they risked their lives and faced death to film what was happening in front of them in the immediate moment. At that moment, I called these films documentary auteur films because that moment demanded immediate recording from the perspectives of people living in grave danger, regardless of the immense personal costs of such kind of filmmaking. There was an exceptional urgency to film exactly what was happening in that moment in time and to communicate it on a mass scale. As a result, this cinema looks nothing like what we work on today, ten years later. That older, more urgent cinema transforms today into documents that can support us in creating contemporary cinema, nourishing our inquiries regardless of their form.

For me personally today is a moment that demands deep contemplation, meditation, searching, questioning, and pulling apart the past, whether that be the history of our country before 2011 or of the early days of the revolution or of the changes that unfolded afterwards. This history makes it imperative to ask new kinds of questions which lead to a very different kind of cinema with a wider horizon of possible ends. There is a much wider spectrum of choices available to Syrian filmmakers to contend with starting from the original conception of their film projects through the projects' execution: the selection of equipment, curation of an intended audience, searching for appropriate means for funding and distribution, and ultimately, the form and content of the film. This broader array of choices creates new possibilities for contemporary cinema.

To return to your original question about the role of cinema today: cinema helps us understand what we are living in today. It helps us search for truth, prompt complex questions for discussion, and hold onto threads for our salvation. It also helps us shed light on what the regime attempts to erase and invisibilize. But more than anything, cinema ensures that we do not collapse and surrender to a suffocating sense of impossibility—that our conditions will never change. This is my own

interpretation on how resistance through cinema effectively works: I resist weakness and doom by searching for the material of my next film, which rebuilds my backbone and keeps me standing.

At the same time, there is another strand of resistance cinema that prioritizes working through memory, as well as studying historical conditions with greater distance and objectivity. These different ways of dealing with our reality represent cinema's vast margin where we can go wherever makes us feel that we can create something positive.

I'll return a bit to my own personal experience and my relationship with documentary cinema today. I spent quite some time between 1985 and 2005 working largely as a collaborator on both documentary and fiction films, and then afterwards, I redirected my attention towards my own voice as a filmmaker. When I did so, I came up with this strange revelatory and free cinema, which takes my personal struggles as a point of departure to reach collective struggle, and by doing so, moving between poetics and realism. So between 2005 and 2020, I made my films within these parameters: honesty, struggle, and resistance against all that might be enforced, simplistic, and expected.

Today as 2023 begins, I find that I no longer have the authority to make documentary films about Syria because the distance between me and Syria has simply become too heavy. I have no real existential or material links with what's happening inside of Syria. In fact, I feel that this vast distance between myself and what the people of our country have to live everyday has forced me to hit the brakes on what I could allow myself to say about Syria in my films.

Today, I cannot look anyone who lives in Syria in the eye out of shame, and I cannot speak about, analyze, or make judgments about what they are living through. For example, I refuse to reproach people who are living today under the Syrian regime and describe them as people who are regime collaborators, as some do. On the contrary, I believe most of the people who remain in Syria today are people who are resisting the conditions of oppression in their own particular ways, and I respect them deeply. I am ashamed to speak about them while I am living in a house in which I have electricity and water, while I have the bare minimum of my daily needs met

without having to live under the daily fear of imprisonment or of being subjected to violence on the streets. Because of my distance from these conditions of life, I have decided to search for a different method of expression other than the documentary form, and so I have written a fictional screenplay for a short film that I am working on today which speaks to my emotions without making any claims on what is happening in Syria.

**BA: I'd like to comment a bit on what you've mentioned about the importance of engaging with history when thinking about the role of cinema in our present moment. I resonate with a lot of what you said. I find myself flung within the large Syrian diaspora, and among a generation that has witnessed the Syrian revolution from a distance at a very young age. While we were kids, many of us discovered the emotions you described, namely the shame towards the people of our homeland, and these emotions still chase us to this day. Yet at the same time ever since our youth, we have felt that we were somehow a part of what happened in our country, and the events of our homeland took on a very large part of our emotional capacity. But if I want to focus more on how I personally engage with this question today, I would say that I am, as many of my generational peers, primarily invested in questions surrounding archives, history, and memory, and it was precisely that investment that brought me to your films and to Syrian cinema more broadly in the first place. For me, cinema has been one of the many ways I have put a concerted effort into becoming more familiar with the history of my country and what unfolded in it before I was born or in my childhood years. I spend a tremendous amount of effort looking into every detail in every archive in search of an answer to the question of "what is it that brought us to the moment in which we live?" It may be a simple and romantic notion, or it may be altogether misguided, but I am convinced that when I engage with the past in hopes of understanding the present in which I live, I may be more effective in playing a modest role in transforming the present into a future that is different from what we live today. This is the impulse behind my obsession with these archives of memories that are captured in**

**sound and image and which we call cinema. And this cinema, including and especially yours, gives me a new language to understand and reckon with my present.**

**HA:** I agree with what you've mentioned regarding your generation. Unfortunately, there is a lack of knowledge among your generation and the generation a bit older than yours about our country's history before 2011. Most of them assume that the Syrian Revolution was the first organized opposition to the regime due to the absence of archives, since there is not much that young people can materially hold in their hands to let them know about the past. This is amplified by the fact that organized opposition movements had to remain secretive and did not produce many material archives like newspapers or films—even more so when it came to talking about our political detainees, whose circumstances were shrouded by complete absence. These silences and archival gaps invite projects for revisiting the past, assembling archives, and exchanging intergenerational knowledge. I find this kind of work deeply important in this political moment. In fact, this is a big part of why I agreed to do this interview with you, despite not knowing each other previously, the vast distance between where each of us lives, and our different primary languages of communication.

I would like to add one extra note in addition to what you've said, which is on some of the differences between your generation's relationship with the word "image," and ours. The image has a very different kind of presence in our lives—for example the singular image that you find plastered as a portrait of the leader all over the Damascus Airport upon your arrival. We are so used to this image, it might as well be the white noise of any built space. As a result, I never noticed just how bizarre this singular image was until I was around a young person who was unfamiliar with our context and got shocked by the phenomenon, which I would describe as a form of visual occupation.

More importantly, that singular image was completely ripped apart in 2011, a year we could only describe as a rupture in the history

of our country. In fact, I would say that the revolution materialized in the very moment that our youth climbed onto each other's shoulders to rip apart the same singular image that we never even dared to look in the eye. This moment is an extremely important station that we need to pause at and stay with, especially in any conversation about the "image" in our country's context.

Another important aspect of the "image" in our country is the image's absence, especially when it comes to the massacre of Hama. Despite the fact that I was born and raised in Hama, and many of my closest friends and relatives are also from Hama, no one has a single image in their heads for what happened in 1982. It is a completely absent image; there is no archive or visual history for that moment. Similarly, there are many parts of our country which cannot be photographed. The reason why I mention all of this is to emphasize the sheer amount of change that took place in 2011. One of the most significant transformations of that time is our completely new understanding of the sociopolitical role of the image as well as its relevance to our region's history and archives.

## SECTION III: Collectivity as Ethos in Syrian Cinema History

**BA: Perhaps we can think through the connections between history, archive, and memory through your film on Omar Amiralay. You spoke previously in a televised interview that the footage you had filmed before he passed away was originally supposed to be developed and supplemented in a more professional production if Omar Amiralay had not unexpectedly passed away. Years later, you returned to that original footage you had filmed, and considered finishing the film almost as if you were returning to Omar's last will and testament. That footage became the backbone of your latest film. My question is about how you treated this material after his passing, because at the same moment you express both the deep love you have for him, and point out certain differences between you two. You voice some friendly criticism. Can you elaborate on the differences between you and Omar, and maybe tell me a bit about what you think are the personal experiences that created these differences?**

**HA:** There are a few different points I'd like to unpack in your question. In terms of how I treated the original footage after Omar passed away, I should say that the footage I shot was largely improvisational and reflected a general outline of topics to be delved into more deeply during a later stage of production. I could not have expected that this footage would end up being the final recorded material before Omar passes away. Moreover, contrary to what I had come to expect from Omar over the course of our friendship, he was actually deeply vulnerable in front of the camera, and spoke earnestly about sensitive and surprisingly personal topics. Even those who know Omar really well were surprised by his vulnerability. Because of that, I was actually really concerned with how I would handle the editing stage. It felt like Omar entrusted me with the vulnerability he shared on-camera before his death, and I needed to honor that trust. What made things even more complicated was the tension between my deep desire to be as adventurous as I am normally

during the editing stage and wanting to hold myself accountable to the subject of the film who had already passed away and could not personally critique the film or even reject it altogether. It really was a heavy responsibility.

The second point I want to address is your suggestion that I was reprimanding Omar when I addressed his negligence of the issue of censorship which made his films impossible to view in Syria. I don't deny that I could and did occasionally critique Omar. It's only natural that I would pose the question of censorship as a point of inquiry since I was the film's director and Omar's interviewer. But I would not go so far as to call it reprimanding—in a sense it was an expression of my own admiration for his stubbornness and his refusal to give the censors who tirelessly chased after him any power over him or over the directions of his films.

As for the differences between me and Omar, I don't think our differences were a cause of disagreement between us, as much as they were simply reflections of our different natures. Omar and I used to always honestly address each other and critique one another—he did it playfully and with a smile while I did it with a seriousness Omar used to jokingly call childish. This was the nature of our friendship!

Having said that, I'll speak a bit on how Omar and I approach cinema differently. Omar is a master of his craft and I refuse to compare myself to him, yet this does not mean I can't mention some of the same things I mentioned in the film about how he chooses the topics for his films. When Omar works on a film, it usually comes from a political consciousness that cannot be separated from an intellectual and artistic vanguardism that he has a right to as a master of his craft. On the other hand, I make my films from my heart and my insides, and from an adventurous curiosity.

Let me illustrate this a bit more deeply. In the early 1970s when Omar worked on *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* (1974) with Saadallah Wannous for example, they both felt that they had a high level of knowledge and political consciousness to confidently stick their feet into the mud of the poorest parts of Syria. From the position of an intellectual and artistic Damascene vanguard, and

after having lived and studied in Paris and participated in the student movement of 1968, they arrived in this forgotten village of Syria in order to conduct a deep critical study of the roots of injustice in our country. That approach undoubtedly came from noble and just intentions. On the other hand, my approach tends to be a bit more quietly contemplative: I listen to the subjects of my film with the intention of expressing their struggles as well as my own struggles. Through this approach I would consider myself to be a part of a larger group of artists who are trying to express their emotions through the cinematic medium and to share them with the viewer.

There is another key point of difference between my approach to cinema and Omar's, particularly surrounding the question of honesty and transparency in the filmmaking process. I always thought it was important that the person behind the camera and the person in front of it maintain a forthcoming and honest relationship. Omar and I have discussed this issue countless times on-screen and off-screen and we never came to an agreement. I felt the need to mention it in the film to allow the viewer to understand Omar's point of view, which is that the film director who prioritizes justice and truth can be dishonest to their film subjects if necessary, particularly if these film subjects do not deserve the director's honesty and transparency because of their complicity in violence and injustice.

**BA: I'd like to focus on the broader historical moment in which you two met and began to build a relationship, specifically in the early 1970s before you were imprisoned and before you left Syria. As you mentioned previously, part of what makes your entry to cinema unique is that it was through the realm of politics. At the time, there were two significant spaces in which you operated: the Damascus Cine Club where Omar Amiralay was a central organizer, and the Marxist circles in *Rabitat al-Amal Al-Shuyu'i*, a leftist political organization operating in secret. What was it that took you to these two spaces, and how were they similar and different?**

**HA:** If you want me to describe to you how I first came to politics, I would like to say that it cannot be separated from the broader atmosphere at the time in Hama where I was born and lived before my family moved to Damascus when I was still relatively young in the early 1970s. Hama, of course, was particularly known for its opposition to the regime. I lived around my uncles who were part of the Arab Socialist Party which was known for its leaders, names like Akram Hourani, Khalil Kallas and others who had also spent many years in prison for their efforts. The general atmosphere in our household was also a deeply political one because our parents raised us to never bow down, to stand up in dignity, and to refuse to remain silent in the face of injustice. So despite the fact that my parents moved around Syria a lot because of my father's work, we still considered Hama to be our central point of reference.

In Damascus, I was surrounded by young people who were interested in political discussions and who were more animated by the general atmosphere of excitement in our country than by consciousness or knowledge. But my relationships with these friends as a little girl made me feel that it was possible to transform the political situation in our country through collective work and study, and that remaining sedated and accepting of a regime that came to power through a coup d'etat against its own party was completely unthinkable. Over time, some friends who were older than me began to support me and took me to secret political organizing meetings, despite my young age. For the record, one of the greatest difficulties we faced at that time was building trust among comrades in secretive organizations, because we all had to prove that we were not informants and that we were all steadfast in our beliefs. Ideally, collective trust gets built through self-development, sacrifice for the sake of others, patience, concealing your political identity as well as your comrades' identities, and sharing your knowledge with others without any form of political posturing. These

might seem like basic qualities but they are actually not really present in most people—they are also all absolutely necessary for secretive political organizing.

My imprisonment, along with other comrades in the late 1970s, was a result of a confession from one of our imprisoned comrades. His feelings of violated personal dignity overcame his solidarity with his comrades—he found it unacceptable to face any violence from state police in order to protect the identity of the organization. So he chose to confess our names and our locations. This example proves that the rigorous political education and training that happens in political organizations and parties does not always manifest well in their members.

**BA: This political atmosphere you mention in secretive political organizations… was that same atmosphere present in the Damascus Cine Club?**

**HA:** I'll speak more broadly about the cine club before answering your question. My entry into cinema was based on a kind of rebellion. When I was a child, I had a much bigger relationship with literature than I did with cinema because my family had encouraged a culture of reading Arabic novels and poetry. Back then I remember I used to get very excited to visit my grandfather's house in Hama because of the massive library he had in his house. In what resembles a scene from a novel, our uncle used to stay up late with us and gather us around him while he read poetry and drank a glass of arak. These kinds of activities created a general atmosphere of interest in the arts which eventually brought us to cinema. Cinema was a particularly bold adventure for us because it used to have an almost legendary aura around it in my imagination,

especially prior to the presence of television and the Internet. So when I heard about the Damascus Cine Club, which used to be close to our house in Syria, I was immediately intrigued, not simply by the possibility of watching the films but because of the rumors I heard about what happened after the films ended: these extremely long discussions that sometimes lasted longer than the film screenings themselves. I started attending the cine club and was mesmerized by the topics which touched on local and global political conditions that I was excited to hear and discuss as a teenager.

**BA: And both the discussions, as well as the cine club were deeply politicized, no?**

**HA:** Of course they were! That was why I went to the cine club in the first place. Even if I had to miss the entire film screening I felt I absolutely could not miss those discussions because they helped me think deeply about the reality I experienced, as well as the relationship between art and politics more broadly. At the same time, I romantically thought I could find potential comrades to join our organization at the cine club. I thought, "surely the cinema people would have many of the characteristics we look for in political organizers." One of these potential comrades, of course, was Omar Amiralay, who definitely used to throw away the propaganda literature I gave to him. I didn't care, I used to be just really thrilled at the idea that he would take them in the first place.

## SECTION IV: Poetics and Politics in Diaspora

**BA: After this time in the 70s, when you were embedded in political organizing and in the cine club, you were imprisoned by the regime, then you left for Lebanon, and then to Paris, which is where your journey as a filmmaker really began. First you worked on film sets for Ossama Mohammad's films, Mohammad Malas's films, Omar Amiralay's films, and those of many other Arab and French filmmakers. Then you made your first film, *I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave*. How did exile in Paris steer your voice and priorities as a filmmaker in directions that might be different or similar to filmmakers in Syria?**

**HA:** Firstly, when you use the word "exile," I feel it carries some political dimensions that I want to distance myself from. I don't like to compare myself to many others who left Syria under much worse conditions—to consider myself among them might be an exercise in self-delusion that I would rather avoid. The last time I visited Damascus was for Omar Amiralay's funeral after his shocking and unexpected passing, and prior to that I used to regularly travel to Syria. I would be subjected to boring routine questioning by the authorities but this never deterred me from going back.

Second, I should elaborate on the period between when I first left for Paris and when I made my first film I *Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave* without comparing myself with other generations or with those who stayed in Syria, since we all have our own trajectories, choices, commitments, and ways of dealing with life's circumstances. When I was imprisoned in Syria, my studies in agricultural engineering in Damascus had been interrupted. After I left prison and traveled to Paris, I did not have the financial means to register in film school and accomplish my own dreams. As a result, I relied on my studies in Damascus to study genetic engineering for very little money, then I studied anthropology and decided to study film at the same

relatively inexpensive college, instead of opting for the more expensive film school I dreamed of. I'm grateful to my good friend Shamil Amiralay (who sadly passed away a few years ago in Damascus), who encouraged me to pursue film and took it upon himself to support my training while I was also studying film. Thanks to his help, I was able to work on my first ever film set, which was on *Stars in Broad Daylight* by Ossama Mohammad when I was still a film student in Paris in the mid-1980s. Working on that set taught me the ins and outs of filmmaking—that was when I first realized that I did not want to have any other career except as a filmmaker. I found my passion, my pleasure, and my personal and political struggle through cinema, and thus could never let go of it despite its financial instability and the impossibility of achieving the full extent of our cinematic visions and dreams. And so I began working in a way that is organically tied to the cinema in Syria.

At the same time, after I left prison in Syria, I refused to do any kind of political work outside of Syria. I felt that political work away from Syria was a self-imposed exercise in delusion, since I felt way too far removed from the daily struggles of Syrians in Syria while I was in Paris. That realization sent me into a deep search for how I can actually be materially useful to my country which was part of my journey into cinema. I realized that I could be useful from Paris as a provider of various resources, such as funding, film equipment, even skilled artists and specialists for Syrian filmmakers inside of Syria to collaborate with. So instead of doing political work from outside of Syria, I wanted to participate in the film industry inside of Syria.

Today I can say that politics was my entryway into cinema: it's an ethic of sacrificing for others, supporting them, and providing all my energies in service of broader political and social change. Over time, I started building up experiences in cinematography, editing, writing, casting, and many other varied roles in cinema because I wanted to be a jack of all trades. Training myself in every aspect of filmmaking helped me make sure I can face all

my needs as a director and allowed me to avoid repetition and routine. It provided me with a really deep joy and an ongoing curiosity for self-development, and broadened my knowledge. So the entire ethic of how I handled my role as a filmmaker could undoubtedly be traced back to my history in political organizing in Syria—it was the reason behind why I gave 20 years of my life to work strictly on others' films, from 1985 until 2005 when I started working on my first full-length film (*I Am the One Who Carries the Flowers to Her Grave*) which was first screened in the Venice Film Festival in 2006.

**BA: It's important to emphasize that the political reasons behind the work ethic that drove you to dedicate your time to others' films transitioned into your own cinema as well. The documentary films you began working on by the 2000s, which you describe as "free films," are most certainly deeply political films. My reading of why you describe them as "free films" is the importance you put on poetics in your work, whether through the lyrical way you choose to edit your films, direct poetic address in your narration, or in any other facet of your filmmaking that lends itself to poetry. Why do you attach poetry to politics in your films? And did your migration to France play a role in your attraction to poetics as a form of political address?**

**HA:** I'll share some things I actually have not had the chance to speak about with anyone before or even think out loud about, specifically when it comes to my relationship with poetry. To be honest, from time to time, I feel regretful about the fact that I am not primarily a poet because of how deeply I tend to enjoy poetry. I imagine my relationship with cinema is actually just a form of compensation—by making films, I am often

overcompensating for my inability to write a good poem that addresses my lived reality. Two days ago I was thinking about how making films, despite its immense difficulty, is often a much easier task for me than writing a poem, or composing a song or a painting, because cinema can be broken down into several small elements which you can adjust to allow you to express yourself most effectively. So I go to filmmaking as soon as I confront my own inability to write the poem I most deeply want to write. At the same time, I'm very used to expressing myself in a way that relies deeply on feeling, sentiment, and conscience, whether I am expressing myself in a political capacity or in any other capacity. This method of expression manifests in the kind of poetic cinema I make, which makes me feel like the camera is simply another organ of my body. The cinema I create is like a dough that resembles my own self-development: it takes shape as my own self takes shape, through collaborative work with others. Actually, this very conversation we are having is an example of that same process, because thinking with you takes me somewhere entirely new.

So all of my works rely on a collective work that is born out of freedom, with a bit of intentionality and preparation beforehand. I see that as the central nucleus of all my films, no matter how different the topics are. The nucleus is a deep desire for communicating with others, for a revelatory transparency, for breaking all boundaries and traditions, and for calling others to share boldly and transparently and to break whatever molds they find themselves born into. So my deepest joy is whenever I hear that people feel more emboldened to make the films they've always wanted to make, but have never dared make the attempt, after watching one of my films.

**BA: I would consider myself among those who learn from your films a new language for bold and transparent expression, which brings me to my final question to you. My question kind of resembles a question Omar Amiralay asks you in one of the scenes in your film when he asks "so why did you, Hala Alabdallah, choose to make a film about me, Omar Amiralay?"**

**HA:** Before you ask your question, I want to say a bit about how some people interpreted my relationship with Omar in the film. Some were quite upset at my supposed audacity in placing myself on the same plain as Omar, the cinematic giant. They feel that my film carries within it an implicit claim that they find arrogant, simply because I spoke about myself in the same film that focuses primarily on Omar. This reaction makes me laugh a bit, and does not prompt me at all towards hesitation or second-guessing the process of making the film, because I treat Omar in the film the same way that I would treat any human subject in my films: with love, respect, curiosity that cannot be reduced to any form of sacrality. If the viewer is bothered by the way I address Omar in the film, this means that I have productively put the audience's assumptions into question. Perhaps the discomfort is rooted in misogyny, because I am a female filmmaker speaking to a male cinematic genius. Or maybe the viewer finds it uncomfortable to see how two different generations can speak to one another, and speak to their lived realities through cinema in different ways.

Obviously I have a great deal of love and admiration for Omar that comes through in both the film and in this interview, but that should not change the fact that I can face him as he was in the same way that he could face me as I was. In fact it is only natural that we should all be on the same equal plain in life without any hierarchies. When I speak to you for example, despite the very big age gap between us, I feel that I am a human being in much the same way that you are, and that we can learn much from each other and arrive somewhere new together in the moment that we meet and think together without any reference to false hierarchies. Perhaps building bridges between souls in this way is exactly what poetry does, in its essence.

**BA: I'm a bit taken aback by what you just described about people's reactions to *Omar Amiralay: Sorrow, Time, Silence*. I personally was not attracted to the film simply because it was a film about Omar, his life, and his films, despite considering myself among those who care very deeply about all of those things. One of the main reasons I loved the film is your role as a director, as a human being, and as Omar's friend, and how you play all of these roles with the utmost honesty. Because you are honest with yourself, honest with Omar, and honest with your audience, you build bridges between all of us. As a matter of fact, I don't even think that the poetry that comes out in your films would have any potency if it was not rooted in that same honesty. At the end of the day, the film about Omar is not simply a film about Omar but it's a film about your relationship with Omar, our relationship with Omar, our relationship with you…**

**HA:** And also about time, death, life, love…

**BA: Exactly, so my final question is an inversion of the same exact question Omar asks you: why did you agree to do an interview with me? And what I really mean by this question is: what is the end-goal behind engaging with different generations from the large Syrian diaspora through your work?**

**HA:** I always tell my cinema students, some of whom I have been working with since 2004, that I dislike when they use the term "teacher" to describe me. This is because I usually feel that I am also learning with them, so much so that I feel like I am dry soil that they are watering. The reciprocity between us is really life-giving for me, it feels like a really important way of dealing with the loss that we have experienced in our country. I feel that the heavy experiences I have endured, experiences that I continue to carry on my shoulders, would be completely paralyzing if not for the joy of discovery and the flexibility that I gain by working across generational divides.

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# Basil AlSubee

**Basil AlSubee is currently a Masters Student at the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at NYU. At Kevo, Basil is interested in exploring archives of Syrian cinema and intellectual history in relation to Latin American Third Cinema and the politics of decolonization. Adjacent to the academy, Basil is experimenting with documentary and screenwriting practices, creatively annotating audiovisual archives of the past from our fraught present of displacement.**

**العدد الخامس من شخصيات**
**شتاء ٢٢٠٢/ربيع ٣٢٠٢**
**البنى التحتية للسينما**

نشر قائمة نشر «عصمت» و شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة " ناس"
تحرير: نور الصافوري
تدقيق وتصحيح لغوي للغة العربية: آية إيهاب
دعم إداري: سابين أبي صابر
تصميم: سارة حلبي

يصدر «البنى التحتية للسينما» عن برنامج الزمالة المقام في ٢٢٠٢ من خلال شراكة بين شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة " ناس" وقائمة نشر «عصمت».
للمزيد من المعلومات يرجى زيارة الرابط بالأسفل:
https://www.naasnetwork.org/topic/news/open-call-research-fellowship



**Issue #5 of Shakyshat**
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**Cinema's Infrastructures**

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## ملفات
MALAFFAT

نحن مهتمون/ات خصوصاً بمواضيع حول:
• نوادي السينما، تاريخها وعلاقات الجماهير بها
• تجارب جديدة في برمجة الأفلام ولاسيما في عصرنا الرقمي
• آرائكم/ن حول المبادرات التي سعت إلى خلق مساحات بديلة لعرض وتوزيع الأفلام في المنطقة العربية وتقييمكم/ن لها
• دور العروض السينمائية في المنطقه العربية وخاصة تلك التي هُدمت أو هُجرت
• السينيفيلية كحالة فردية او جماعية
• أرشيف السينما العربية (بالمفهوم الواسع للأرشيف) وعلاقتنا به وحاجتنا إليه

## NAAS · نـــاس

شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة «ناس» هي شبكة تضم شاشات ونوادي سينما عربية غير حكومية ذات رؤى برمجية تعتمد على التفاعل المباشر مع الجمهور. تسعى «ناس» من خلال عملها إلى توسيع نطاق الأفلام المتاحة للجمهور العربي وخلق حوار حول السينما وتشجيع وجود أنماط متعددة لتجربة المشاهدة الجماعية للأفلام. يلتزم مشتركي/ات «ناس» بتقديم برامج أفلام منتظمة، ويلتزمون/ن باتجاه الشبكة لتغيير ديناميات عرض ومشاهدة الأفلام في المنطقة. تضمَ الشبكة مبادرات تسعى من خلال برمجتها وفعالياتها ومساحاتها واستراتيجيات التواصل مع جمهورها لدعم ثقافة سينمائية حيوية ومستدامة بهدف تطوير تفاعل الجمهور مع الأفلام. تنظَم «ناس» سلسلة لقاءات وبرامج أفلام متداولة وورش إقليميَة لكوكبتها النامية من الفضاءات السينمائية الغير حكوميَة. و هي جمعية مسجلة في برلين تمارس عملها اقليمياً بالتعاون مع مشتركي/ات الشبكة في البلدان العربية المختلفة.

## عصمت

قائمة نشر «عصمت» (٢٠٢٠) محرر وناشر ومجموعة مطبوعات وشخصيات. نتخصص في النشر الفني وإنتاج الكتب والمطبوعات التي تشتبك مع المجال الفني والإنتاج الثقافي. ننشر ونعمل تحت اسم «عصمت» وهي شخصية قامت بدورها سناء يونس فى فيلم «جنون الشباب» (خليل شوقي، ١٩٧٢)، عصمت هي بوصلتنا ومصدر إلهامنا والقاهرة هي مدينتنا.
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## شخصيات

شخصيات نشرة فصلية ورقية (وأحيانا رقمية) تصدرها عصمت في الربيع والشتاء وتفسح من خلالها المجال للمقال النقدي الطويل، مع إعارة اهتمام خاص للمقالات في مجال النقد السينمائي. صدر أول عدد لشخصيات في ربيع ٢٠٢١ وقد صدر في شتاء ٢٠٢٢/ربيع ٢٠٢٣ العدد الخامس بالتعاون مع شبكة الشاشات العربية البديلة (ناس) أونلاين على ملفات ناس.