Regards

USJ 1875 IESAV
Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth
Faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines
Institut d'études scéniques audiovisuelles
et cinématographiques

Regards
32 | 2024
Knowledge Production in Times of Fragility:
An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade

Zero Degree Cinema Documenting the Syrian Uprising, and the Utopia of Cinema

Zaher OMAREEN

Edition électronique
URL : https://journals.usj.edu.lb/regards/article/view/1211
DOI : https://doi.org/10.70898/regards.v0i32.1211
ISSN : 2791-285X

Editeur
Editions de l'USJ, Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth

Référence électronique
OMAREEN , Z. (2020). Zero Degree Cinema Documenting the Syrian Uprising, and the Utopia of Cinema. *Regards*, (32), 203-243.
https://doi.org/10.70898/regards.v0i32.1211

DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :
Knowledge Production in Times of Fragility: An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade

ZERO DEGREE CINEMA DOCUMENTING THE SYRIAN UPRISING, AND THE UTOPIA OF CINEMA

Zaher Omareen

London 2022

This research was funded by Ettijahat - Independent Culture, the Council for Social Sciences, and the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC).

I would like to thank Dr. Hassan Abbas, Dr. Hanan Kassab Hassan, and Ossama Mohammed.

Résumé | Cette recherche examine le « cinéma zéro » pendant la révolution syrienne de 2011. Elle se concentre sur la façon dont les images à basse résolution, la photographie à main levée et le son ambiant naturel contribuent à la formation d'une identité audiovisuelle distinctive dans le cinéma documentaire. En utilisant les cadres théoriques de Roland Barthes, John Ellis et Hito Steyerl, l'étude place les vidéos de protestation syriennes dans le contexte du paysage plus large des vagues et des courants dominants du cinéma documentaire. Il révèle l'impact de la documentation spontanée et citoyenne dans les zones de conflit et examine comment les expériences de peur et de mort imminente influencent les nouvelles caractéristiques artistiques du genre. Les résultats mettent en évidence l'utilisation innovante de la technologie et de l'esthétique pour façonner l'image publique de la révolution, suggérant que ces éléments redéfinissent non seulement les pratiques documentaires, mais remettent également en question les récits traditionnels entourant les conflits politiques. En fin de compte, cette recherche contribue à une compréhension plus approfondie de l'influence mutuelle entre les matériaux audiovisuels et les mouvements de changement social et politique, en particulier dans les contextes politiques des pays gouvernés par des régimes dictatoriaux.

Mots-clés | Révolution. Cinéma documentaire. Printemps arabe. Basse résolution. Syrie.

Abstract | This research investigates "Zero Degree Cinema" in the 2011 Syrian uprising, focusing on how low-resolution imagery, handheld filming, and ambient sound contribute to the formation of a distinctive audiovisual identity in documentary cinema. By employing theoretical frameworks from Roland Barthes, John Ellis, and Hito Steyerl, the study contextualizes Syrian protest videos within the broader landscape of documentary film movements. It reveals the impact of spontaneous, citizen-led documentation in conflict zones and examines how experiences of fear and mortality inform new artistic characteristics in this genre. The findings highlight the innovative use of technology and aesthetics in capturing the immediacy of the uprising, suggesting that these elements not only redefine documentary practices but also challenge conventional narratives surrounding conflict and representation. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how audiovisual materials can reflect and influence social movements, particularly in contexts marked by crisis and upheaval.

Keywords | Revolution. Documentary cinema. Arab Spring. low-resolution. Syria.

"The Wider the Vision, the Narrower the Statement"
Al-Nafari – Attitudes and Conversations

Introduction

December 17, 2010 marked a turning point in the contemporary history of the Arab region. On that day, street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire, sparking a series of protests across Tunisia, his homeland, and the majority of Arab countries. This wave of popular protests later became referred to as the "Arab Spring[1]."

Over the following years, the Arab Spring has led to various consequences, either by transforming existing regimes and creating a new political reality, as was the case in Tunisia, or by shaking political and social systems, as occurred in Bahrain, Morocco, and Egypt. Yet, in other countries, the uprisings turned into brutal wars, as witnessed in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. However, in all scenarios, the Arab Spring has led to major transformations in Arab societies on multiple levels, such as their relationship with image, media, and social media platforms.

At the beginning of the uprisings in the main Arab Spring countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain), protesters used various principles and tools of non-violent activism to achieve their desired goals: justice, freedom, democracy, and ending ruling dictatorships. The use and employment of these tools varied based on the local conditions of each country. For instance, occupying a public square or organizing a sit-in, as happened in Cairo's Tahrir Square, was not an option in Libya, where the conflict turned early on into an armed confrontation with Muammar al-Qaddafi's regime. In Yemen, mass demonstrations against Ali Abdullah Saleh led to his ouster, with the intervention of regional powers, while these same powers intervened to consolidate Bahrain's ruling regime to put an end to the wave of popular demonstrations.

There is no doubt that many movements for change around the world have adopted non-violent activism, relying on audiovisual materials as an effective means to achieve change. Photos and videos taken by citizen journalists have influenced various events around the world as in the 2007 Saffron Revolution in Burma, the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran, or even in relatively older cases that led to a general protest movement, including the 1991 demonstrations in the United States known as the Rodney King Protests[2].

However, in the context of the Arab Spring revolutions, particularly the Syrian uprising, which is the main subject of the present research, the peaceful activism

1- It is widely believed that the term "Arab Spring" first appeared in the US Foreign Policy magazine in an article written by Professor Mark Lynch titled *Obama›s 'Arab Spring'*? and published on January ,6 2011. (LYNCH Marc, «Obama's 'Arab Spring'?», *Foreign Policy,* 6 January 2011, [Accessed October 2024]. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/06/01/2011/obamas-arab-spring/).

2- In 1991, George Holliday accidentally filmed, using a home video camera, the assault of Rodney King, a black man, by local policemen. The broadcast of this footage on a television channel later sparked a wave of anti-police protests across the United States, commonly known as the Rodney King Protests. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdktDOeG2VI

model can be attributed to three main interlinked factors – **first**: protesting was public, not limited to a certain number of citizen journalists or activists; **second**: production means were easily accessible, notably cell phone cameras and their relatively inexpensive associated technology; **third**: videos and images were widely spread and were not limited to the scope of traditional media outlets thanks to social media.

Videos filmed by Syrian activists and protesters followed the street movement in all its stages, especially during the first months of the uprising. They impacted and were impacted by the movement, resulting in the interaction of the three aforementioned factors to create a model with three main intertwined audiovisual elements. These elements are analyzed and explored in the present research: 1) low-resolution image, 2) portable camera and body language, and 3) distorted sound and multiple forms of expression.

The Syrian model is not unique only for its audiovisual elements mentioned above, but also for its contents relating to death, fear, violence and their new image, and for the aesthetics associated with these concepts, which are discussed and compared with previous documentary cinema experiences in the second part of the present research.

However, the Syrian model clips are particularly unique in terms of spontaneity, a concept that the final part of the research addresses by analyzing the idea of "Performance" in documentary films. Therefore, the research is inspired by French critic Roland Barthes' (1915-1980) definition of *Writing Degree Zero*, summarized as the author being free from all constraints during the creative writing process (...) in order to reach the utopia of the novel[3].

Can the Syrian model represent what the research calls "Zero Degree Cinema"? Can it reach a "utopia of cinema" that is free from all the constraints of the creative process? These questions will be addressed in the final part of the present research.

Research Method

A selection of videos from Syria, mainly posted on YouTube between January 2011 and September of the same year, were taken as a sample. These first nine months of the Syrian uprising were the core of the peaceful movement and marked the peak of spontaneous use and capture of videos compared to later phases When military operations increased, video recording became more organized, which is clearly noticed in the content of the published videos.

The phase tackled in the present study heavily reflects the artistic virtues of the Syrian model we are discussing. Indeed, much of the Syrian video production of the uprising that followed this phase seems to have been influenced by the movement in various ways. We have also used a few examples outside the aforementioned time frame to illustrate some of the research approaches.

3- BARTHES Roland, *Writing Degree Zero*, New York, USA, Macmillan, 1977, p. 87.

The sample used in the research was selected from a very broad range of published videos. To date, there is no definitive estimate of the number of videos posted from Syria, although some entities responsible for collecting and archiving have so far managed to archive nearly "three million videos and posts"[4].

In selecting the research sample of 122 videos, several criteria were adopted, most notably the following: the video used in the analysis should represent a wide range of other similar videos in terms of form, content, and relevance to the artistic characteristics that the present research assumes and examines; the video should be filmed by an individual, not by an institution or an official entity such as a news agency or television, except some examples that are clearly justified as serving certain purposes of the research.

Videos that could not be proven authentic, those filmed outside Syria, or those that are not directly related to the topic of the research were excluded, such as: footage of fighting published by so-called media offices affiliated with military forces, or those that are considered commercial.

The main challenge that the research faced in selecting the sample was the difficulty in finding the required clips and examples, as some of them were removed from the source shortly after publication, and YouTube in early 2019 deleted more than 300,000 videos related to the Syrian revolution. To avoid this, all examples used in the analysis were later independently saved in a secure cloud storage space, accessible via links included in the present research; some of these clips feature harsh scenes that should be watched with caution.

The process of verifying these videos has also been challenging, sometimes referring to eyewitnesses appearing in the video, or people who could confirm the location or time of the event captured in the video. The clips were subject to source verification in order to check, for example, if a video of the filmed event was posted twice, recorded with two cameras and posted on two different YouTube channels, or recorded with several cameras. Contacting the YouTube channel owners who posted the videos was also difficult, as some have gone missing or have been killed.

The present research relies on an analytical approach based on comparison and contrast, in light of the theories of communication sciences and various documentary theories, such as John Ellis' "Filmer" theory, Marshall McLuhan's "Medium and Message" concepts, Pier Paolo Pasolini's "Cinema of Poetry" theory, Hito Steyerl's "Poor Image" concept, and author Bill Nichols' theory on the "The Voice of Documentary". The videos are discussed in reference to relevant artistic models and experiences, such as the Third Cinema movement, Dogma Cinema, Dziga Vertov's Kino-Glaz "Film Eye", Direct Cinema and the diary and self-portrait film movement. The aim is to uncover the common elements between the videos and all these theories and artistic experiences in order to reach the new features that shape the audiovisual identity of the discussed Syrian model.

4- THE ARCHIVE, Syrian Archive, Syrian Archive [online], 2022, [Accessed July 2022]. Available at: https://syrianarchive.org/en/data-archive.

Audiovisual Aesthetics of Zero Degree Cinema

Low-Resolution Image

> *"No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking, in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model."*
> André Bazin – *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*

In the opening scene of Chilean director Patricio Guzmán's documentary *Nostalgia for the Light*[5] the camera moves around an antique German telescope perched on an observatory in the wide Atacama desert. We slowly get a close-up view of the glory and history of this giant telescope. In close-ups, we see its delicate edges, the rust in its smooth brass, and the scratches accumulated over time on the black paint.
The details that Guzmán was keen to show at the beginning of his film are poetic visual metaphors for the theme of the movie, which portrays the most violent period in Chile's history under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. The film tells the story of women searching for the bodies of their loved ones in the sands of the desert, a place that Pinochet turned into an unclaimed graveyard for his opponents. It all takes place under the stars at night in the area considered one of Earth's most important space observatories for its clear skies.
These extremely fine details would not have been so obvious if it weren't for the advanced imaging tools that captured every single detail of this telescope's body.
Nearly six months after the release of Guzman's film, on the other side of the planet, one of Syria's earliest popular protests took place on February 17, 2011, in the crowded Al-Hamidiyah Souq in Damascus.[6]
The cameras that captured those few minutes were low-resolution, but the details were fairly clear in the video that caught the scene. A trembling, timid image in a narrow, shaky frame, with pale, fuzzy, overlapping colors, blurry, rushed and out of focus, but it was the sole shot of the country's first popular protest after nearly forty years of silence.
In contrast to Guzman's captivating opening scene, the image of the uprising is less visually appealing, yet its low quality, or resolution, is what gives it a special value and somehow makes its content visually unique and leaves more room for interpretation.

This low-resolution image draws its perfection from its imperfections, so to speak. It can be seen as one of the most important aesthetic pillars of Zero Degree Cinema that the present paper seeks to explore in the following three sections.

5- GUZMÁN Patricio, *Nostalgia for the Light*. Icarus Films, Brooklyn, 2010.
6-CLIP 01. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/m46kmuyhnwr83j1h5dgwcfd190aac720

Parallel Life of the "Poor" Image

In *The Virtual Life of Film*, researcher David Norman Rodowick argues that the incredible shrinking medium has left cinema "fighting for its very aesthetic existence," following the replacement of the analog world by a digital simulation in film industry. He points out that the identity of cinema, naturally a combination of several arts and related to technological evolutions, is constantly threatened[7]. However, Rodowick's concern does not seem to be well-founded; John Belton argues that the role of digital technology and its impact on the identity of cinema has been overestimated, claiming that major changes have already taken place in cinematic art, such as changes in screen size, colors and sound. These have all been truly significant evolutions in the identity of cinema, as they are noticeable to the normal viewer, but the changes brought about by digitization are not, as they are not directly observable to anyone but experts. He emphasizes that their contribution to cinema is overrated and that digital technology is only a "false revolution" in cinema. Changes in the cinema's identity, if they occur, are not necessarily due to the filming technique, but rather to the artistic use of this technique, as evidenced by the many cinematic currents that have emerged and subsequently evolved based on the use of a particular technique[8].

This constant contrast between the two aforementioned theoretical currents is perhaps most evident in the conflict between low-resolution and high-resolution images in cinema.

In her paper *In Defence of the Poor Image*, Hito Steyerl argues that this struggle between the two parties is only linked to power structures where appearance as well as other factors such as distribution, diffusion, and economic production play a major role. As Steyerl states, this calls for the liberation of cinema from the constraints of established traditional categories[9].

In her arguments, Steyerl recognizes that a high-resolution image looks "more brilliant and impressive, more mimetic and appealing, and therefore more seductive than a poor one." However, she emphasizes that low-resolution or poor images "are poor because they are not assigned any value within the class society of images" and thus "the rich image established its own set of hierarchies"[10] until new technologies opened up more possibilities for a creative breakdown of this hierarchy.

Steyerl's arguments are echoed by a series of authors, most notably: Lev Manovich, who also criticizes the high-resolution image, considering it as illusory and deceptive unlike the low-resolution image, which turns the passive viewer into an active viewer looking for what they consider to be the content of the image[11].

7- RODOWICK David N., The Virtual Life of Film. Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 7.
8- BELTON, John. "Digital cinema: a false revolution", *October*, 2002, vol. 100, p. 111.
9- STEYERL Hito, "In Defence of the Poor Image," e-flux Journal, 2009, no. 10, p. 2.
10- *Ibid.,* p. 8.
11- MANOVICH Lev, "The Paradoxes of Digital Photography", *Photography After Photography*, 1995, p. 166.

Blurred Image of a Crystal Clear Reality

The video posted on February 17, 2011 can be considered a key example to reveal the characteristics of low-resolution images in the Syrian video model.[12]
The clip opens with events taking place, as tens of passersby gathered in the Al-Hamidiyah Souq in the center of Damascus chanting anti-corruption slogans. The crowd soon started chanting another slogan "Syrian people will not be humiliated." The clip ends when the then-Minister of Interior arrives and starts reprimanding and threatening the assembled protesters. He says that what is happening is a "protest," pushing some people to stop protesting. The Minister's car then leaves the place amidst the confusion of passersby.
A few hours later, the video went viral on social media. The footage looked shaky and fuzzy, low-resolution and confusing, not revealing, and sparking unanswered questions about what happened at that moment, and what triggered the passersby to protest.
To understand this clip, one should definitely consider the political context that the Arab Spring protests in neighboring countries have imposed. Using a cell phone camera to film what is happening is a direct and spontaneous reaction, an involuntary reflex in response to a traumatic moment of tension.
Within this logic, researcher and theater director Rabih Mroue suggests in his film *The Pixelated Revolution,* a new cinematic manifesto that frames the footage of the Syrian revolution, similar to the Dogma Cinema manifesto suggested by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995.
Mroue outlines nineteen elements of this film type, where the eighteenth element favors the filmed event over the image resolution. Mroue believes that one should not worry about image clarity, resolution or quality, but rather about capturing the event taking place[13].
Mroue's praise of the low-resolution image seems to stem from a purely aesthetic approach. However, the reality is that for those who film and participate in demonstrations, the low-resolution image is often not an artistic choice, but rather an inevitable outcome imposed by the nature of the filmed event, which lacks clarity in the first place. In most cases of the Syrian model clips, the camera operator does not know much about the event taking place in front of them and may expect anything to happen. Additionally, the Syrian regime prohibited traditional media outlets from reporting, preventing them from using advanced cameras to film and report what was happening, not to mention the limitations of technology itself, as cell phone cameras were just starting to become more technologically advanced.
This close association between the image of the event and the event itself is what makes the Syrian model so unique, as the low-resolution image derives its authenticity from the chaos of the event itself. In a metaphorical sense, reality itself is shaky, unclear and subject to constant threat and unplanned momentary

12- CLIP 01. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/m46kmuyhnwr83j1h5dgwcfd190aac720
13- MROUE Rabih, MARTIN Caren, "The Pixelated Revolution", TDR Drama Review, 2012, vol. 56, p. 23.

changes. Therefore, the form of the image and its content are strongly linked, or as radical installation artist Thomas Hirschhorn put it: the low-resolution image is a reflection of "today's uncertainty"[14].

Over decades, the Syrian regime has managed to create an extremely hegemonic image of its rule. The image of President Hafez Al-Assad with his carefully drawn features has invaded public spaces, appearing to dominate the Syrian visual landscape throughout his ruling. The colorful image of an infinitely severe face, majestically framed and delicately proportioned, reflects the reality of one man controlling the fate of everyone around him, and paints a highly accurate picture of a systematically falsified reality. However, this dominant image was soon shattered with the outbreak of the uprising.

In the video showing the removal of the statue of Hafez Al-Assad from the city of Hama in central Syria, the president's giant statue seemed to surrender to the crane as it was being removed from the city's main square to be hidden after protesters had threatened to destroy it.[15]

This historic moment in the Syrian uprising, captured by a low-resolution cell phone camera, is the only known record we have of this event (at least until the time of writing the present paper).

This clip shows that there is something unclear going on, but what we see is absolutely real. This is where the skepticism generated by low-resolution images emerges as it turns passive viewers to active ones, according to Lev Manovich. In a way, it is a counter-image to the false certitude marked by the image of Al-Assad's rule for decades, for a high-resolution image does not necessarily mean a clearer representation of reality.

This is not limited to the specificity of the "mediocre" image as a informative of the event, but goes beyond that to show the relevance of the image to the event and the questions it raises. The camera operator's sarcastic voice is heard from behind the camera in this clip, taking us one step closer to the heart of the statue with a short and sharp comment: the interior of the statue was always empty, contrary to what we thought.

Low-Resolution Image and "High-Resolution" Imagination

On June 1, 2011, a 1 minute and 45 second clip was posted on YouTube under the title: *Shahid: Rajol Yusawwer Qatilahu* (Watch: Man Filming his Killer[16]). The most noticeable thing about this video is its low resolution, compromising the clarity of the event's details without affecting them.

The video was filmed from a relatively high place, perhaps the balcony of a house. The camera operator whispers that he is trying to film "security forces

14- HIRSCHHORN Thomas, Why Is It Important – Today – to Show and Look at Images of Destroyed Human Bodies. Le Journal de La Triennale, 2012, p. 6.

15- CLIP 02. Available at : https://app.box.com/s/yqcqdie83jjwwz42z9q8reg6empjhwps

16- CLIP 03. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/546fb2dger8a9udrjmrb3hjsaxbgz05b

shooting at protesters in the Karm al-Shami neighborhood in Homs," and the camera, hidden, moves in a slow, shaky way, covering random angles.
Caution prevails despite the color distortion that reduces the image's details and blurs its frame. The camera continues moving for a few seconds before we hear the sound of gunshots. Then suddenly, the camera faces a man with a rifle, hiding at the corner of the street, pointing his weapon directly at the camera, and the next second, the camera operator and his camera fall to the ground. We hear him struggling with his injury. Silence reigns for a few seconds as the camera's image stabilizes, facing the ground, before we hear panicked voices in the background getting closer as the video ends.
The video raises an endless series of questions about what happened, to state a few: What happened next? Did the camera operator die? Who is the sniper? What does his face look like? Did he kill others on the street? In fact, this uncertainty that the image creates by omitting details and maintaining the action is what makes it unique. Perhaps leaving us trying to answer all these questions is what triggers our imagination to think of endless options and complement the missing image with details of our own invention, as if we were part of the event, not just spectators.
Within this context, what we see in these clips is closer to the "Visual Pretext", intersecting with Pier Paolo Pasolini's introduction of this concept in his theory of The Cinema of Poetry. According to Pasolini, the author-director usually uses "visual pretexts" through which they access their own personal stock of cinematic vocabulary, drawn from the core of their own personal dreams and memories[17], which therefore prompts the viewer to use these visual pretexts to access his own personal stock of dreams and memories as well.The difference in the case of the Syrian model is that the author or camera operator here does not deliberately create this "Visual Pretext," but it is imposed on them by the events. Therefore, they are not bound by any constraints of their consciousness, but the clip still triggers the viewer's imagination to fill the void in the video. The camera operator and the viewer create the content: The first through reality and the second through imagination - an infinite act that is open to endless possibilities.
The videos filmed in the first months of the Syrian uprising certainly laid the foundations for a distinctive audiovisual identity that influenced the thousands of videos published in the months and years that followed. This identity is perhaps best characterized by the low-resolution image, but it is also unique for its interaction with other elements, including the handheld camera and body movement, which made the Syrian model even more authentic, as will be discussed in the next section.

17- PASOLINI Pier Paolo, Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom. United Artists, 1976, p. 550.

Portable Camera and Body Language

> *"I am an eye. A mechanical eye. I am the machine that reveals the world to you as only the machine can see it. I am now free of human immobility. I am in perpetual motion. I approach things, I move away from them. I slip under them, into them. I move toward the muzzle of a race horse. I move quickly through crowds, I advance ahead of the soldiers in an assault, I take off with airplanes, I fall on my back ad get up at the same time that the body falls and gets up."*
> *Dziga Vertov – Kino-Pravda 1919*

The film titled *The Man with the Movie Camera*[18] by Dziga Vertov is packed with vibrant segments, but one of its most memorable scenes is the girls' basketball game. It is a short scene that, like most other scenes in the film, is fast-paced and energetic, reflecting the contemporary spirit of urban life in the USSR's metropolises at the time. However, what makes this scene stand out from the rest is the truly exceptional camera movement.

This scene can be considered one of the earliest moments in the history of cinema to explore the possibilities of camera movement; the camera does not just follow the action, but engages and interacts with it, as if it were a ball that the players pass back and forth. The camera moves from player to player, almost as fast as the ball itself and their moving bodies. At times, the camera seems to move on its own, obeying the rules of the game independently of the players, conveying a sense of full involvement, not just observation.

The utter freedom of the camera here, as opposed to other scenes where the camera seems to be more focused on observing, was recognized early on by Vertov. As Mary Snyder puts it, the possibilities of using camera movement as a means of expression are driven by an exceptional sense of experimentation[19].

This realization is most evident in Vertov's 1919 manifesto *The Kino Eye*, where he emphasized that the value of the camera's movement comes from its interaction with the events around it, its continuous movement, and its dependence on the nature of the event it is filming, which determines the required type of movement[20].Vertov's approach to freeing the camera from its inertia was further clarified almost three decades after his experiments, when Direct Cinema emerged in the 1960s, transforming Vertov's individualistic approaches into a mass production wave in cinema.

According to researcher Paul Monaco, the Direct Cinema movement appeared due to two factors that can be considered as their raison d'être: first, the artistic "desire for a create a new cinematic realism," and second "the development of equipment necessary to achieving that desire" including a lightweight portable camera (16mm) and the possibility to record audio separately[21]. The Direct Cinema

18- VERTOV Dziga, *The Man with a Movie Camera*. USSR, 1929.
19- SNYDER Mark H., Analyzing Literature-to-Film Adaptations: A Novelist's Exploration and Guide. *London*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2011, p. 145.
20- PETRIC Vlada, "Dziga Vertov as Theorist," Cinema Journal, 1978, vol. 18, p. 41.
21- MONACO Paul, *The Sixties, 1960-1969*. California, University of California Press, 2003, p. 206.

wave at the time seemed like a revolution against the educational approach to documentary that prevailed before the Second World War. Its advocates valued neutrality, observation, and following the events that unfold, as in the works of pioneers such as D. A. Pennebaker, Albert and David Maysles, and Richard Leacock. However, this did not eliminate the role or presence of the director but changed their artistic position making them "able to penetrate into the reality, rather than leaving it to unroll itself in front of the observer"[22], according to Jean Rouch, the pioneer of Cinema Verite, the French version of the Direct Cinema movement.

This dynamic paved the way for later experiments and innovation. During the 1980s, many individual experiments emerged based on the early Direct Cinema principles, including those of directors Nick Broomfield, Kim Longinotto and Chris Marker. Influential currents have emerged from them, such as the 1995 Dogma Cinema that made the portable camera movement an imperative requirement, a golden rule of this current[23].As the camera movement has been associated with technology from the start, filming technologies have made a major jump since the early 1980s. The digital revolution led to the rise of compact, lightweight, and inexpensive video cameras. In Direct Cinema, the camera was strictly dependent on the subject and following it; in Dogma Cinema, the camera movement was driven by the desire to create an artistic language of its own. However, home video cameras revealed unlimited possibilities for visual experimentation, as in the "documentary diary" videos, which suggested an intimate, individual cinematic language and turned the author into the subject of their own video.

However, this close camera-author relationship is marked by intentionality, or premeditation. This negates by definition the spontaneity of this relationship which, as director and theorist Tony Dowmunt argues, diminishes as it becomes more difficult for the creator to control the events around them, although he recognizes that this intentionality varies from case to case[24]. The spread of cell phone cameras at the beginning of the new millennium transformed the traditional relationship among the parties involved in the communication process: **the message, the sender, and the medium**. The camera has become not only handy and accessible, but also unintentionally available. Consequently, the relationship between the camera operator and the camera as an extension of the camera operator's body, as per Marshall McLuhan's famous concept, has changed to an interactive and collaborative relationship. Researcher Sean Cubitt considers that a rich and complex relationship has developed between the two parties, and the camera has been allowed more freedom to its operator[25]. Examining the new relationship between these three parties, in light of an exceptional event, will be the next entry point for analyzing the specificity of camera movement and body language in the Syrian model clips.

22- ROUCH Jean, "The Camera and Man". Principles of Visual Anthropology, 1975, p. 7.
23- JERSLEV Anne, *Realism and 'Reality' in Film and Media*. Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002, p. 45.
24- DOWMUNT Tony, *A Whited Sepulchre*. 2008, p. 54.
25- CUBITT Sean, "Codecs and Capability", *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, 2008, p. 45-47.

Camera – Body – Event

With few exceptions, the Syrian model has almost no videos filmed with fixed or tripod-mounted cameras. This trend of handheld camera use is not intentional; in fact, it is largely due to the medium available, which is most often the cell phone camera.

In a YouTube video titled *Awwal Muzahara fi Madeenat Hama* (The First Protest in Hama), a man is seen running and trying to rapidly get closer to a nearby protest.[26] The video is shot from a low angle, with the cell phone's camera facing the ground most of the time. The video only shows the man's feet, then the feet of people around him running in the same direction, and eventually leads us to the scene of a protest where dozens of people are gathered chanting slogans against the regime and security forces. This was the first protest that took place in Hama.

The cameraman's confusion is evident in the video, as we see the sky at times, then the feet of some passersby, and sometimes the surrounding buildings. The camera seems to be traveling as blindly as the camera operator themself, and the only thing that suggests the camera is on the right track is the sound coming from afar, getting closer and closer as the camera moves forward. This confusion is very similar to the protesters' uncertainty and fear in the early days of the revolution, but it is mainly due to the camera that imposes its own presence on its holder, as if it was leading them.

The "feelings of the camera" are almost exactly the same as the feelings of the camera holder, which makes the Syrian model clips stand out in the first place. It is not experimental as in Direct Cinema, nor is it driven by an aesthetic purpose as in Vertov's opinion. On the contrary, it is purely impulsive and spontaneous. Perhaps the most extreme form of this impulsiveness arising from the unity of the camera and the body is clearly shown in the videos filmed with secret cameras.

In the clip titled *Shaware' Al Madeena Tahta Saytarat Al Amen wal Jeysh* (The Streets of the City under the Control of the Security Forces and the Army)[27], the camera takes us on a tour around the city. Panic prevails in this video. In every moment there's an underlying sense of danger: the risk of security forces spotting the camera. The woman filming this video and her camera, hidden under a black scarf, as seen from the corner of the lens, are extremely united. The camera here, unlike in the other videos, is not portable, but fixed somewhere on the body, and the distance between the body and the camera is almost zero, so that we can hardly distinguish between the two parties. It is as if the body is filming what is going on.

Unlike this clip filmed with zero distance between the body and the camera, other clips depict more dangerous events with a greater distance between the event and the camera, and the viewer clearly notices it. For instance, in the video

26- CLIP 04. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/ridrim8hyoe3boyhqqzrle8cy1mav48k

27- CLIP 05. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/cyglgt27k8e42h6h60nqb1w9w44sb3zn

Al Qasef fi Madeenat Darayya (Bombing Darayya)[28] ,the camera operator captures a barrel bomb dropped from an aircraft on nearby buildings. The semi-static camera captures the violence of the moment, in relative neutrality, with a wide view. The camera holder seems more like an observer than a participant, and there is no direct reaction from the camera, or from the person holding it, to the massive explosion caused by the falling bomb. The camera's fixed distance from the event pushes the viewer to observe rather than interact.

The Syrian "Filmer"

TV and news agencies generally prioritize still shots, or shots captured with a tripod, over mobile video footage. The BBC's traditional guide for field camera operators, encouraging them to use a camera stand whenever possible, is perhaps the best illustration of this preference, one of the most notable traditions of TV journalism[29].

When following the Syrian events, media outlets have only got a massive amount of shaky footage, shot with low-resolution mobile phone cameras, but these were the only available clips from Syria. There was no other alternative to covering an event as big as the Syrian uprising but to use these clips in news broadcasts. This has encouraged many ordinary untrained citizens to film and post their footage online to make their voices heard.

In later stages, prominent media organizations such as Al Jazeera News network and Al Arabiya, as well as other specialized institutions and organizations, trained a significant number of activists on the basics of photojournalism, in order to turn this spontaneous visual language into a more conventional, TV-standard format. The goal was no longer to capture the event by any means possible, but to capture it in the means that best suited the needs of the TV business, and the so-called local reporter made a comeback.

However, this interactive visual language remained in many of the later clips given the high number of untrained citizens involved in the movement, as well as the large scope of the events.

The theories that address the relationship between the medium and the camera operator implicitly assume the latter's professionalism and knowledge of what they are filming, but the Syrian model is a bit different, as the camera operator here is not a professional, and referring to them as a director is highly debatable. In his book *Documentary Witness and Self-Revelation*, author John Ellis calls non-professionals who film and post their material online "Filmer." He states that now, "it is necessary to use a new term, such as 'Filmer'" to describe someone who routinely produces such material without aiming to be a filmmaker[30].The term "Filmer," suggested by Ellis, was originally coined by anthropologists; Ellis takes it from French *un filmeur*. He explained that the term was applied in the

28- CLIP 06. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/8ho3ya0qtwbcd70ocfo9pxhlctux6126

29- The guide can be found via this link: http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/news-style-guide

30- ELLIS John, *Documentary: Witness and Self-Revelation.* London, Routledge, 2011, p. 25.

1920s to refer to social scientists who use the image as a research tool, producing videos outside the context of traditional documentary-making, not intended for an audience, but designed for purely informative purposes.

The term "Filmer," which Ellis associates in his new definition with digital development and the proliferation of mass media, seems to be the term that most closely describes the camera operators of the Syrian model we are studying. They are amateur videographers; they are not professional journalists, nor are they directors (although some of them later turned into professionals), and what they do goes far beyond what a typical citizen journalist would do.

What the Syrian model adds to Ellis's contemporary definition is the presence of the Filmer's body, which imposes itself on the filmed footage. This interaction is based on the effect of the camera operator on the camera, as the camera imposes itself on the movement of the camera holder's body.

The hero, if one can call it that, is the camera operator's body, whose movement and feelings are directly reflected on camera. Here, the camera seems to surrender to the camera operator's body and reactions, so much so that the camera operator 's spontaneous panic seems to be the event. What we see in this clip seems like a self-portrait of a special kind in which the camera lens does not face its subject, as if we were in front of an interactive mirror in which the camera operator's feelings and body are reflected.

In the Syrian model, the body and the camera clearly influence each other, interacting in a dynamic that varies according to the degree of gravity of the event captured. However, the impact of the event is most intense on both the body and the camera in their unity. The following two examples illustrate these varying degrees of impact.

In a clip titled *Awwal Al Muzaharat fi Daraa* (One of the First Demonstrations in Daraa)[31], the impact of the event seems even more intense. Anti-riot forces are seen attacking a group of protesters. One of the protesters tries to challenge the attackers by saying that he is filming "to show people around the world what is happening in Daraa governorate." The camera operator and his camera are fully engaged in the event. In the first part of the video, their unity is the event in itself. The officer starts getting close to the camera holder, who flees backwards to a safe place, while still filming the start of the regime's attack on the protesters. The event here imposes its own dynamics on the camera operator, and thus on his camera, which seems to be absolutely interacting with the event, following the actions taking place, surrendering to threats that we can also hear, but continues shooting, not hiding its fear of the event, sometimes shaking, sometimes stumbling.

This brings us to Max Schleser's notion of "in-betweenness," who considers that mobile media are unique for being at the core of the event and not capturing it from the outside[32]. This can be observed in the video titled *Musawwer Yusawwer*

31- CLIP 07. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/7p1azn98330ucrmk9gwq5pc4tkdgm6yc

32- SCHLESER M.R., WILSON G., KEEP D., « Small screen and big screen: Mobile film-making in Australasia », *Ubiquity: The Journal of Pervasive Media*, vol. 2, 2013, p. 118–131.

Mawtahu (A Camera Operator Filming his Own Death[33]). The main difference is that here the current event is deadly.
In this video we see a camera operator trying to capture a video of a plane with its explosive payload nearby. The distance cannot be clearly estimated, but it is relatively close. Suddenly, we hear the sound of a very close explosion, the camera shakes violently, falls to the ground and gets covered in leaves. We hear the moaning of the camera holder, we see the leaves moving on the lens. After a moment, we no longer hear his moans, and the shooting slowly continues before the video stops, ending with the death of the camera operator.
The event, as cruel as it seems, is the dominant element of the image, prevailing over all other elements with its destructive power. The camera's unity with the body of the camera operator clearly appears here. This is the core of the visual language of the Syrian model, which in turn is complemented by a sound specificity that has its own aesthetic dimensions detailed in the following part of the present research.

Distorted Sound and Multiple Forms of Expression

> *"Sound Is Half the Picture"*
> Georges Lucas

The videos posted by Syrian citizen journalists and activists have not only changed concepts of the documentary image, but also those of documentary sounds. This change is mainly evident in the spontaneity and interactivity of the sound element in these clips. This part of the research will try to shed light on this particularity from two main points of view: the human voice and the ambient sound.

The Human Voice

The use of the human voice in the Syrian model appears in two main aspects: a) intertitles and b) voiceover.

Written Titles and "Non-Silent" Cinema

In 1929, the first Academy Awards ceremony was held, presenting awards in several categories, some of which are still the same today. In that year, Joseph Farnham won the Best Titles Writing award for all the titles he wrote for three films. It was the first and last time this award was given. It was discontinued after the written titles were removed when sound was introduced to cinema. Written titles are no longer used except for a few artistic experiments, as in the retrospective film *The Artist*[34], directed by Michel Hazanavicius.

33- CLIP 08. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/5o19rck0edxqkzi41r7frjd1ldku1tym
34- HAZANAVICIUS Michel, *The Artist*. Warner Bros., 2012.

With the beginning of the Syrian uprising, videos started to feature what can be seen as a practice similar in form and function to the written titles in silent films, namely the small written signs that were included in the clips filmed by protesters. The purpose behind the use of these signs was not the same as the purpose of written titles in silent films, but it could be considered as an evolution thereof.

Brad Chisholm provides an in-depth reading of the role of written titles in silent films. He believes they played an important informative role in several uses, such as commenting on the event, highlighting a notable aspect of the event, maintaining the narrative sequence of events and other necessary functions required considering the absence of sound at the time[35].These functions are most evident in the explanation, and sometimes the interpretation of the circumstances around the image, and the conveyance of the potential sounds of the scenes, especially in 1920s film models. This is the case in the written titles of *Nanook of the North*[36] by Robert Flaherty that gives the famous seal hunt scene a dramatic dimension that the image alone would fail to convey.

However, these uses at the time were due to technological limitations, so why did the Syrians resort to this outdated technique and reuse it, despite the potential of contemporary technological advances in sound, and despite the fact that their videos are not silent in the first place?

The first reason is the need to hide the camera operator's identity from the Syrian security forces. At the beginning of the Syrian uprising, citizen journalists started filming the faces of protesters; this led to the arrest of many people, according to numerous testimonies documented by human rights organizations. The ultra-violent actions of the Syrian intelligence services and the policies of systematic intimidation have led protesters and camera operators to take extreme precautions. Therefore, protests were filmed from behind without showing recognizable faces, and written titles were used instead of live voiceover.

Let's take, for example, the protest titled *Khirbet Ghazaleh Janazat Tachyee' al Shuhada'* (Khirbet Ghazaleh, the Funeral of the Martyrs), published on YouTube on March 7, 2012[37]. The protest is filmed from the top of a building. From time to time, the camera operator's hand extends in front of the lens, holding a card on which it is written: "March 18, Syrian Revolution of Dignity, Khirbet Ghazaleh, the two heroic martyrs: Wassim Menhem al-Zawaida, Mohammed Ahmad Badiwi, Wednesday, March 7, 2012."

This card provides information about the event, as a report would present them, answering what is known as the famous Five Ws of a news story: who, what, how, why and when. Its linguistic density is very similar to that of silent film titles.

The second reason is fighting skepticism. In the beginning, through its propaganda and security forces, the Syrian regime tried to undermine the protests and to

35- CHISHOLM Brad, "Reading Intertitles", *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 1987, vol. 15, p. 137.
36- FLAHERTY Robert J., *Nanook of the North*. Les Frères Revillon and Pathé Exchange, 1922.
37- CLIP 09. Available at : https://app.box.com/s/0c72qmsdyd6h5g1zxfdnsqit4d2sik0v

discredit the peaceful protesters at the time by labelling their movement as violent[38].

This media war between protesters and the Syrian regime's security propaganda apparatus has pushed protesters to use cards as undeniable visual evidence of the time and place of the protests. Thousands of videos include information referring to the date, location, and often the cause of the protest.

Protesters also used other means such as official newspapers, car number plates, and public landmarks to mark the time and place of the protests: squares, statues, street clocks in major cities, among others.

A clip published on June 22, 2011 titled *Surya Al-Majd Al-Qabun Muzaharat wa Lafitat Al-Qabun* (Syria: Al-Majd Al-Qaboun Demonstration and Banners[39]), for example, reveals most of the visual signs used by the protesters: the government's official newspaper *Al-Thawra* appears at the beginning, and the camera operator zooms in on its date of issue.

Cards are therefore used as an irrevocable proof of date, as the date of an event cannot be proven by simply consulting the date it was posted online. In a tense security situation, posting a video of a protest may be delayed by days or months, while the real date of the event appears on the cards.

In addition to these two main reasons, camera operators used the information cards for a political and propaganda reason, which brings it closer to the original use of the titles in the period of silent cinema. At an advanced stage, these cards started conveying intense political messages, and their use quickly spread among the protesters, as if they were evidence of that unified identity in which one is part of a whole.

The clip on the protest titled *Homs Bab Hud Masa'iyya Rai'a wa Lafitat Hamma* (the Gate of Hud Homs, Great Evening and Important Cards) published on YouTube on November 3, 2011[40], shows the protest from behind as the protesters chant together one of the revolution songs criticizing the regime and calling for freedom. However, the cards written in front of the camera are raised by a hand from behind the lens, filling the entire screen and blocking out the actions taking place in the background. It gives the event another dimension, guides the viewer to the purpose of the event, and gives them a more detailed insight into its context, sometimes serving Flaherty's early purpose from the use of titles in documentaries. In terms of form, the cards are still used for the same purpose, covering the screen and blocking everything else behind, to become the center of the action.

At a later stage, protesters became relatively fearless, especially as the protests spread further, allowing for the use of the camera operator's voice, for example,

38- Most notably, the former Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem showed videos of what he said were "brutal acts of violence committed by protesters against security and army forces." The videos later turned out to be recordings of violent incidents that took place in Lebanon and Iraq, according to the testimony of eyewitnesses who participated in those events and confirmed this in interviews conducted on Lebanese TV channels.

39- CLIP 10. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/egxxtwt97lhp3a70cyilvcc5jh3porvz

40- CLIP 11. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/iauc1ja9qpodp2lzm3zx6suu3kh1kriq

to explain what's going on in the video. However, cards were still used and became more of a visual identity than a means of conveying political messages or providing contextual information.

Voiceover and Multiple Voices

The high tendency to film events in Syria can be interpreted as a reaction to the lack of documented evidence against the Syrian regime's decades-long violations. Ossama Mohammed, director of *Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait*[41], explains this spontaneous tendency of protesters to grab cameras and film the events of the uprising as an act motivated by the protesters' desire to keep evidence of the revolution events so that they are not forgotten or denied. That happened in the 1980s massacre in Hama, where all possible documentation of the event has been destroyed by the regime and vanished[42].

According to several human rights reports published over decades, freedom of expression has been severely restricted. In fact, the Syrian Emergency Law imposed in 1963 prevented any political activity outside the strict control of the ruling party, the Arab Baath Socialist Party. Riad al-Turk, the famous Syrian opposition figure, described Syria as the »Kingdom of Silence«, where the only voice in the public sphere seems to be that of the sole leader. This might be the most accurate description of this period. The outbreak of the Syrian revolution has given the people back their lost voice, and the multiple voices in the face of the single sole voice are what distinguishes the Syrian revolution.

The protesters were not concerned with the voiceover as filmmakers usually are. First, they are not professional filmmakers, nor are they interested in making a film in the traditional artistic sense, but they are more concerned with the "desire to express" what they think and believe about what is happening around them. Consequently, the voiceover accompanying clips of the Syrian revolution does not seem preoccupied with objectivity or neutrality. On the contrary, it is mainly straightforward, although some of its features are similar to those of the voiceover in documentaries.

In his book *The Voice of Documentary* (1983), Bill Nichols classifies voiceover in documentaries into four types: 1) live comments that dominate the visuals, 2) inspired comments that push the viewer to reach conclusions on their own, 3) comments delivered through interviewees, 4) comments that combine the personal voice with interviews and titles, turning the filmmaker into a participant witness who explains what is happening rather than being an objective observer[43].Although this classification is rather outdated, it is still valid for understanding the different types of voiceover that documentaries include to this day. The voiceover in the Syrian model could fall under the fourth type

41- BEDIRXAN Wiam, MOHAMMED Ossama, *Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait*. Les Films d'Ici & Proaction Film, 2014.

42- Interview with Ossama Mohammed, 2015.

43- NICHOLS Bill, "The Voice of Documentary". Film Quarterly, 1983, vol. 36, p. 18.

proposed by Nichols. It has the features listed by Nichols because of the variety of methods used, but at the same time it is characterized by a key feature that gives it its own identity: the spontaneous interaction with the event in its different forms and variants.
This spontaneous interaction varies depending on the event and its seriousness. The comments in most segments of the Syrian model are live, improvised, and unprepared, allowing for real-time interaction.

In many clips shot in the first phase of the movement, we can hear the voice of the commentator specifying the location and date of the demonstration, for the same reason that protesters used written cards, as mentioned above: to provide contextual information. In other cases, the narrator, or commentator, gives more explanation of the event and other messages, and even offers their own perspective on what is happening through the voiceover.
The video titled *Al Aalam Baddo Yshuf li Sar bi Daraa al Thawra al Suriyya* (The World Has to See What Happened in Daraa, the Syrian Revolution) published on April 29, 2011, captures some of the earliest scenes of the peaceful movement against the Syrian regime[44]. In this clip, we hear the voice of the camera operator-commentator insistently shouting "peaceful protest, peaceful protest" at the beginning, and at the same time, we see regime forces attacking the protesters, slowly moving towards them, while he insists on the word "peaceful." At the second minute of the clip, we hear someone calling the camera operator "Iyad, Iyad..." and then we hear the camera operator's flustered voice shouting "the world needs to see, don't say anything to anyone..." He then addresses the policeman, saying "Don't shoot!" The policeman moves towards him and asks him to turn off the camera, and the camera operator challenges him and says "The world has to see what happened in Daraa Governorate, so go ahead and shoot, shoot me."
The way the commentator speaks and its relevance to the event gives the clip even more meaning. If we were to remove the sound and rewatch the video, we would get a different impression and would not notice the challenging behavior of the camera operator and his fellow protesters in the face of the security forces moving towards them. We would have only seen them fearfully going back in front of the guns
In this context, fear is key to understanding many of the characteristics of voiceover in the Syrian model, as it is reflected in the voice as much as in the image. This is evidenced in the clip titled *Homs al Shabiha Yaatadun aala Nisa' fi al Share'* (Shabiha of Homs Attacking Women in the Street[45]). In this video, the camera operator films from a nearby window in a relatively high building the moment Syrian regime armed supporters spread in the streets. Moments later, two girls seem to move closer to the men and they suddenly get arrested. We realize that the camera operator is shocked from his voice as he comments in

44- CLIP 12. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/zwkr5p3whn36j7egr5uhcm9bkb9eftd7
45- CLIP 13. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/el6ideonfuublhldzi82ppjwo8sgltto

a shaky and frightened voice "Allah is Sufficient for us! Most Excellent is He in Whom we trust!... Security forces and Shabiha." The two girls are violently dragged into a side street. The commentator here describes the event that we actually see, but fear is also conveyed through his frightened voice, his panting breath, and his echoing words, not just through the filmed event itself.
This interaction with the event is most intense and extreme in cases of direct confrontation with death. In the video titled *Muwaten Suri Yusawwer Lahzat Maqtalihi bi Qadhifa* (A Syrian Citizen Films the Moment he Is Killed by a Missile[46]), two men are alternately filming one another near their home, and then, in the mid of what is seemingly an ordinary joyful daily situation, we hear the sound of an explosion that at first seems to be quite distant. The man in front of the camera says "Oh God!" and for the next two seconds we see nothing but dust covering the whole place, only to realize that the missile hit the man in front of the camera. The voice of the camera operator then turns into a series of jumbled sentences and anxious prayers marked mainly by moans. This highlights the role of ambient sounds as an essential complement to the human voice, as discussed in the following part.

Ambient Sound

Ambient sound is one of the constituent elements of the Syrian model's sound identity. This can be seen in two aspects: a) the advantages of technological limitations, and b) the sound of the body as an ambient sound.

The Advantages of Technological Limitations

The technological limitations of built-in cell phone microphones are part of the identity of the Syrian model, largely complementing the "limitations" of cameras that produce the previously discussed visual material.
Technically: Most cell phone cameras are equipped with unidirectional microphones that record sound as a single, mixed sound wave. As for professional audio recording equipment, it includes omnidirectional microphones capable of recording at least two waves, enabling them to capture more sounds and later reproduce them in at least two sound waves: left and right, not just one mixed wave[47].Due to these technological limitations, the cell phone microphones used at the beginning of the Syrian uprising and for years afterward picked up all ambient sounds indiscriminately; the different sounds took turns being heard in the recordings, the loudest sounds, or the closest sounds to the camera or microphone, being the ones picked up. When a microphone is exposed to sounds higher than it can handle, it is unable to pick up the lower waves, and is limited to the higher waves, as in the case of an explosion, where a distorted and harsh

46- CLIP 14. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/icsi3k0e1ue2kl7xnw5uxamy8ye4pjal
47- EARGLE John, *The Microphone Book: From Mono to Stereo to Surround - A Guide to Microphone Design and Application*, Florida, CRC Press, 2012, p. 184.

sound suppresses all other sounds, depriving the recording of audio details.
For example, in the video titled *Lahadhat Suqut Barmeelayn Qurb Al Mussawer* (Two Barrel Bombs Fall Near the Camera Operator)[48], the camera films two large bombs falling from a distant airplane towards a populated area. We hear the powerful sound of airplanes, then see dust filling the frame after the barrel bombs hit the ground. In parallel, we can hear the loud sound of the violent explosion.
The audio here seems to perfectly correspond to the image. Just as the dust fills the entire frame and cancels out all other visual elements, the sound of the explosion drowns out all other sounds. This physical shattering that we see in the image is mirrored in what looks like a shattering of sound as well. As Ilpo Koskinen says in his analysis of the profound effect of sound on the image, "people learned to 'listen' with their eyes," as in the case of extreme images[49]. In the Syrian model, these technological limitations produce a kind of "pixelated sound," so to speak, which complements, in terms of the specificity of the artistic elements, the low-resolution image discussed in a previous section. This sound needs the viewer's memory and imagination in order to complete the scene.
Such freedom in dealing with soundscapes also allows for unexpected discoveries. This is evident in the aforementioned video showing the arrest of two girls in the street. The clip begins with the loud sound of a nearby flock of birds, overshadowing the image of the quiet street in front of us. This sound is heard throughout the scene despite being interrupted by the voice of the commentator, the distant shelling, the voices of the security officers, and the screams of the two girls who had just been arrested. As the checkpoint guards disappear from the frame and the clamor fades, the sound of the birds returns to the forefront of the recording, as it was at the beginning of the video. In another context, a better title could be given to this video: Another ordinary day in the life of an unlucky Syrian street.

The Sound of the Body as an Ambient Sound

The Syrian model is almost devoid of any studio-recorded sound, be it voiceovers, synthesized sound effects, or even soundtracks, and most of the sounds in this model are direct, ambient sounds. The tendency towards the use of ambient sound here is not experimental, as in Dogma Cinema, which requires that sound be recorded at the same time as the images are captured, not separately[50]. Rather, it is a compulsion consistent with the circumstances of the uprising and its relationship with the pressing security situation.
According to Glorianna Davenport and Natalio Pincever, ambient sound plays

48- CLIP 15. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/5y69qnu4ekyk40ikzcudfd3t81ptpx01
49- KOSKINEN Ilpo, Sound in Mobile Multimedia: A Mobile Design Challenge, Proceedings of the Designing Pleasurable Products and Interfaces, 2005, p. 2.
50- GEUENS Jean-Pierre, "Dogma 95: A Manifesto for Our Times", Quarterly Review of Film & Video, 2001, vol. 18, p. 195.

a key role in delineating the geographical and physical visual boundaries of a place, often providing the viewer with important contextual information that will enhance their perceptual awareness of what they see inside the frame[51]. However, ambient sound in the Syrian model is more than that. It captures not only the sound of the event and the general atmosphere surrounding it, but also the sound of the body; the body of the camera operator and the body of the subject. The presence of the camera operator's body is not only evident in the quality of the sounds captured, but also in its production of sounds and not just words. This is consistent with the camera operator's tendency to convey what they see and hear exactly as it is.

In a video titled *Majzarat Halab Suwar Al Juthath Allati Tamm Al 'Uthur 'Alayha Fi Nahr Queiq* (The Aleppo Massacre, Images of the Bodies that Were Found in Queiq River)[52], the camera operator films dozens of dead bodies lying on the riverbank, freshly pulled from the river. These people were apparently executed, and some were even still handcuffed. The camera operator films close-ups of the bodies lying on the muddy ground, showing them one by one. We can see the details of the mutilated, bloated bodies. The camera operator hardly says a word during this scene except for stunned mutterings, but one sound dominates the scene and is truly terrifying: the sound of his hesitant footsteps, as they sink into the silt of the riverbank. For three and a half minutes, all we see are the corpses lined up on the riverbank, the camera operator's elongated shadow above them, and the sound of his loud, muddy footsteps piercing the stillness of the overwhelming environment that surrounds him.

The presence of the camera operator's body is also audible when they are directly threatened, as reflected in most of the Syrian model videos showing protests and security forces attacking the protesters. One of the most famous videos in this context is a clip showing the dispersal of the Homs square sit-in that took place in March 2011. This video was not published until early 2012, almost a year after it was filmed[53]. The video captures one of the earliest violent reactions by regime forces to any potential gathering, turning every square into another "Tahrir Square", which is a place where political demonstrations occurred in Cairo.

In this clip, protesters flee the square toward side streets. The series of sounds we hear conveys the camera operator's fear: The sound of his gasping breath, the sound of his body as he pushes through the fleeing crowd, the sound of his running footsteps, and the sound of the camera shakily rubbing against his other hand as he moves away. The series of sounds produced by his body, combined with the sounds of heavy gunfire and the mass panic captured in the video, confront us directly and harshly with the possibility of death, inviting us to listen to these sounds with our bodies and not only with our ears.

51- DAVENPORT Glorianna, SMITH Thomas A., PINCEVER Noah, "Cinematic Primitives for Multimedia", IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications, 1991, vol. 11, p. 70.

52- CLIP 16. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/raq0xx1dqw20z62hksxp4ee0n9vkibsj

53- CLIP 17. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/87vtvrf4mnxsovu1nx72fqj73mhiv165

In contrast to the sound of the camera operator's body, the sound of the subject's body emerges as a countervailing duality in its relationship with the camera. The Syrian model, as mentioned above, is characterized by the absence of recorded music in the background. It is, however, filled with live songs and chants.

Since the beginning of the uprising, songs have featured prominently in the demonstrations. In fact, many popular songs denouncing the regime were written and widely chanted across the country, significantly defying the regime's security apparatus. Along with these songs, collective dancing took place in public squares, which gave the revolution, when it was still peaceful, its first identity [54].It was not only the sound of chanting and singing accompanied by simple percussion instruments, but also the sound of clapping and dancing bodies that characterized these videos and gave the revolution its sound identity. For instance, in the video titled *Da'el Ya Umm Al Ahrar* (Da'el, Mother of the Free) [55], which shows one of the evening demonstrations that took place in the city of Daraa after the expulsion of the regime forces, the voice of the protesters chanting and the sound of their frantic clapping can be heard. The body is clearly present as a producer of sound, as it is involved in and produces the event. This is also the case in thousands of other videos of the protests and the chanting.

These sounds may not possess any specificity in themselves, but when they are placed in the general context of the gravity of gathering for a demonstration, they take on another dimension beyond mere rhythmic and frantic clapping. They represent a bold and collective challenge to the authority of the repressive regime and to the unilateral and strict voice of the leader.

However, the sound-producing body in the Syrian model is not always full of life; it is a body that is threatened, afraid, and dead.

In the video titled *Homs Muhawalat Sahb Juthat Al Shaheed Taht Al Qans Al Mustamir* (Homs: Attempting to Drag the Martyr's Body Under Constant Sniping)[56], we watch an attempt to drag the body of a dead man from a crossroads exposed to snipers in order to bury it. If we exclude the voices of the commentator and those gathered around the body, there are two sounds that stand out more prominently: The first is the sound of the metal wire, bouncing and hitting the ground in its repeated desperate attempts to reach the dead body, and the second is the sound of the body as it is dragged across the ground to be brought to a safe corner.

These two sounds are crucial to the emotional perception of the scene. Indeed, they delineate the geography of the confined space and its boundaries, as well as the danger surrounding it, more clearly than the explicit voiceover. The sound of the body rubbing against the ground is a purely ambient sound that deepens the sense of what Stuart Hanson calls "emotional realism," which, as he

54- OMAREEN Zaher, "The Symbol and Counter-Symbols in Syria," In HALASA Malu, OMAREEN Zaher, MAHFOUD Nawara (eds.), Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline, UK, Saqi Books, 2014, p. 105.

55- CLIP 18. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/caa86bx20syg7u8pckrm0z8rpq4lrf5t

56- CLIP 19. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/xa5hhbusghsfobcsuobnvki3mo4opbvv

summarizes it, consists of employing and recycling sounds, lights, and ambient sounds generated spontaneously in favor of a creative aesthetic element[57]. Certain aspects of the "emotional realism" mentioned by Hansen appear more clearly in another video, titled *Al Qannas Yahros Al Qura* (The Sniper Guarding the Villages)[58], where the camera is attached to the scope of a sniper's rifle and is used to scan distant fields. At first, the camera is unable to locate the exact target. In the distance, we can see smoke rising from a building and we can hear the wind rushing through the empty wheat fields. This stillness lasts for long seconds, after which, without warning, the rifle bullet is shot towards its target. Then, a harsh silence settles, overshadowing the dark image of the stones which fill the entire lens of the camera that had fallen on the ground. This is considered emotional realism as well, but the difference is that it was not produced after shooting. It was purely spontaneous.

The Images of Death, Fear and Violence

> *"Dictators are never as strong as they tell you they are. People are never as weak as they think they are."*
> *Gene Sharp – How to Start a Revolution*

The circumstances created by the Syrian revolution and the events that followed have radically changed the concepts of **death, fear, and violence**. The present research examines some aspects of these changes while analyzing the audiovisual characteristics that define the Syrian model videos. However, the changes that this part of the research focuses on are those that occurred in the image of the three concepts above, which in one way or another modified our perception of them, making the image a part of the concept and not just an external representation of it.

Self-Portrait of Violence

The "leaked videos" constitute one of the most prominent examples of self-violence that it is worth discussing in order to understand the changes in the concepts of body, death and fear within the Syrian model.
By "leaked videos," we mean the videos filmed and published mainly by the soldiers and forces of the Syrian regime or, more broadly, published by opposition forces following the arrest or, as some human rights reports suggest, the elimination of these regime fighters. These videos feature practices that are often violent and sometimes unusual.
These videos do not fall within the Syrian model sample defined at the beginning of the present paper, but their use in this context is procedural, as they

57- HANSON Stuart, *From Silent Screen to Multi-Screen: A History of Cinema Exhibition in Britain Since 1896*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 111.
58- CLIP 20. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/jd3cokinituk7eaycmcayyl5xkh69iwy

represent the opposite of the videos filmed by protesters during the Syrian uprising and reflect, in a way, the other side of the conflict in Syria. Examining them would provide a different approach to the Syrian regime's practices from within and shed light on the private lives of those involved in the regime's forces as individuals, not just as a collective force whose members cannot be distinguished from each other.

The word "leaked" also reveals the reality of the Syrian regime's strict prohibition, in the early period of the uprising, on publishing any images or videos other than those published by the official or unofficial media of the regime. These videos thus seemed like a breach of the wall of silence that the regime had surrounded itself with. They were taken for a purpose and published for a completely different one, but what are these two purposes?

The answer to the second part of the previous question (Why were the videos published?) is somewhat procedural, if we assume that the leaked videos were mostly published by the opposition forces. In fact, they spared no effort to publish everything they thought would "expose" the Syrian regime and its practices, which were difficult to document (at least at the beginning of the uprising), with the aim of using these videos as an effective tool for mobilization. As for human rights centers and organizations, they used the leaked videos as irrefutable evidence of the violations committed by the Syrian regime forces[59].

However, it is the first part of the question that is most problematic: Why were these videos filmed by the soldiers and forces of the Syrian regime?

Most of these leaked videos have one thing in common: The normalization of violence. Very early on, the regime deliberately used the image of violence as a "flagrant manifestation of power", as defined by Hannah Arendt[60], in an attempt to flex the muscles of its monster, so to speak. The regime employed such practices to scare protesters and quell the early demonstrations against it. One of the most prominent examples of these practices, which paved the way for the normalization of the relationship with violence, is the Hamza Al-Khateeb incident. During the first months of the protests, the Syrian regime arrested a large number of protesters, including the child Hamza Ali Al-Khateeb, born on October 24, 1997, who was arrested in late April 2011 in Daraa.

On May 25, 2011, regime forces returned Hamza Al-Khateeb's body to his family. It showed signs of severe burns and brutal torture, including broken bones, and his penis was also cut off[61]. Hamza's family posted photos and videos on social media showing the child's severely swollen body, which bore signs of torture[62]. These images quickly went viral, sparking demonstrations that were joined by hundreds of thousands of protesters across the country. The regime tried to

59- In its human rights report titled *If the Dead Could Speak: Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria's Detention Facilities*, Human Rights Watch used leaked photos and documents to reveal the horrors of torture in Syrian prisons: https://www.hrw.org/ar/video-photos/video/2015/12/21/284768

60- ARENDT Hannah, *On violence*. Florida, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970, p. 236.

61- HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, Torture Archipelago, HRW [online], 2012, [Accessed January 2022], p. 32. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/07/03/torturearchipelago

62- CLIP 21. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/bv4inx5vhkjyx2vmp23k3vn31hvhn728

deny the accusations, but not seriously. Syrian state television broadcasted an interview with a "coroner" and published a medical report stating another cause of death. The report indicated that the child had died from gunshot wounds during a local clash, which seemed to contribute to the further dissemination of the images[63]. By publishing these images, the Syrian regime reinforced the idea that violence is legitimate as long as it is inflicted on those it considers "enemies."
Throughout its history, the regime has resorted to a policy of intimidation, but the only proof of the use of this policy is the accounts and testimonies of the survivors, or the targeted rumors spread by the security propaganda. It has resorted to this policy under false pretexts such as weakening national sentiment and undermining the power of the people, pretexts it has used to justify its crackdown on freedom of opinion and expression over many decades[64].
The Hamza Al-Khateeb case was one of the earliest instances in which such an image of violence was made public. Even in the case of a public massacre like that of Hama in 1982, only scattered individual testimonies and a few photographs record the devastation of the city.
The images of torture not only normalized violence, but gradually turned the act of filming and displaying violence to a public audience into a common occurrence, as the subsequent period of the revolution and then the war will prove. These images legitimized the portrayal of violence as a defensive act which there is nothing wrong with spreading for the purpose of revenge and intimidation. Some of these videos even went a step further, to the point of celebrating violence as a heroic act.
To address this point, we will use three videos as examples in the following analysis, each of which sheds light on a different aspect of the image of violence as suggested in the present paper.
The first example shows a group of Syrian regime soldiers dancing to the tune of a popular song inside a house they had just seized. They were semi-naked, wearing only their helmets and glittery underwear belonging to the women of the house, and carrying their rifles[65].
The exhibitionism here prevails, as if the video was a self-portrait of its "violent" protagonist displaying his power and his dominant authority in its most extreme and contradictory form.
This video brings us back to Hannah Arendt, who quotes Bertrand de Jouvenel's psychological justifications for violent practices. He explains the purpose of violence as follows: "a man feels himself more of a man when he is imposing himself and making others the instruments of his will," which gives him "incomparable pleasure"[66].

63- The interview with the coroner regarding the Hamza Al-Khateeb incident, broadcasted by Syrian state TV, in which he denied that the body had been subjected to any torture and stated that the mutilation was the result of decomposition, (CLIP 22. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/vdvgj6g2z029maxcag5mjj2246i73u29).
64- GEORGE Alan, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. London, Zed Books, 2003, p. 30.
65- CLIP 23. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/7tck9j2db4c1d28kq9ce987mq100yf3t
66- ARENDT Hannah, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

If we consider the intrusion in the house and the aggression of those who live in it, mentioned in the example above, as an act of violence, the relationship between the victim and the aggressor, which is characterized by violence and by the pleasure resulting from this violence, goes beyond subjugation. This relationship is manifested through the tendency to go against the image of the fighter as a "fierce and dominant male", considering him instead as a "playful girl", which constitutes a completely opposite representation in the prevailing societal norms. Arendt justifies this contradiction by arguing that there is a strong reciprocal relationship between the ability of the man who exercises power to impose domination, and his susceptibility to submission and obedience, a relationship that has more psychological than political dimensions. In other words, this strong, all-powerful man is able to submit to his master to the point of slavery.

The second example appears to be more related to the immediate violent event. It shows a group of men, some of whom are soldiers in a military airplane, dropping barrel bombs on a small village that looks peaceful from above[67]. One of them is laughing, and the other is casually filming with his cell phone, as if what he is doing is a normal, daily act. One of the soldiers lights the fuse of the barrel bomb with his cigarette. This is the defining moment, the moment that emphasizes the extreme absurdity of the act of violence. It is also one of the few clips where the face of the "killer" is revealed while the face of the "victim" is not.

The celebration of violence in its most extreme form, however, can be seen in clips of direct torture carried out by the Syrian regime forces against detainees. This third example, titled *Taadhib Al Shabiha Lil Madaniyeen Bil Sakakeen Wal Melh 18+ - Musarrab Khateer* (Shabiha Torture Civilians Using Knives and Salt 18+ - Shocking Leaked Video) is just one of the numerous torture videos[68]. In this clip, we can see several armed men surrounding two young men lying on the ground naked and all tied up. One of the armed men slowly cuts their backs with a knife, while the other meticulously pushes salt into their wounds, making sure that the white salt penetrates the open wounds.

In this clip, fascism appears in its most extreme form, with violence being a practice whose purpose is the pleasure derived not only from the suffering of others, but also from watching their pain over and over again. Otherwise, why would the event have been filmed at all? This video seems to be a real-life representation of Susan Sontag's view, which she expressed in her book *Regarding the pain of others* (2003). She argues that when torturers see bodies in extreme pain, they feel a pleasure similar to that of seeing naked bodies, or in other words, a deep sexual pleasure achieved by seeing the pain of others[69]. This is similar to Pier Paolo Pasolini's view in his famous film *Salo, or the 120 Days of*

67- CLIP 24. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/3i2xlkjzng3k30gsl8gt1xauf16dzrlm
68- CLIP 25. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/aw9czs49y00uotj3kqfgp47t5vrha3cb
69- SONTAG Susan, "Regarding the Pain of Others", *Diogène,* 2003, vol. 1, 2003, p. 34.

Sodom[70]. In this film, torture seems to be an unequivocal means of achieving the orgasm desired by the torturers.
These videos not only legitimized violence, but also legitimized filming and displaying it, especially since, unlike the uprising videos, the "leaked videos", which have little regard for the presence of a presumed viewer, seem more like a self-portrait of violence in one of its truest and most revealing forms.

Fear and Reproduction of the "Fearsome"

The image of dictator Hafez al-Assad monopolized public space in Syria for more than three decades, as we mentioned in a previous section, and was a metaphor for the hegemony of the regime over public space. Since Hafez al-Assad took power in 1970, this image became, over time, a symbol of absolute fear, reinforced by the security measures imposed by regime and its actual practices on the ground, including the arrest and elimination of its opponents. These practices were kept secret and supported by the intelligence propaganda apparatus that widely promoted the image of a mysterious and strict leader[71].As it was later revealed, the fearsome image of Hafez Al-Assad did not change at all after his sudden death in 2000 and the assumption of power by his son Bashar. Assad the father continued "to rule from his grave", as the popular expression suggests, relying on the highly cohesive intelligence apparatus that he had created and managed brilliantly throughout his life.
In her book *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (1998), Lisa Wedeen analyzes the tendency of the regime to permanently terrorize society of the image of Hafez Al-Assad, to which it was reduced. According to her, the principle of governance in Syria was not based on convincing the people of the competence or efficiency of the ruling regime, but rather on making sure that fear controlled the people, as evidenced by the regime's demand that citizens provide "external evidence of their allegiance to a cult whose rituals of obeisance are often transparently phony"[72].Wedeen elaborates on this argument through her "Acting 'As If'" theory. She explains that the Syrian regime was not originally interested in convincing people but was rather concerned with getting people to go through what she calls a public and national spectacle, in which the citizen proves their loyalty to the leader constantly and daily, even if they are not sincere deep down; what they need to do is master the role and be sincere in their performance. All this made the image of Hafez Al-Assad as a fearsome and powerful leader dominate the public space almost completely. Based on her vivid observations of the late 1990s in Syria, she writes:

70-PASOLINI Pier Paolo, *op. cit.*
71-HALASA Malu, OMAREEN Zaher, MAHFOUD Nawara (eds.), *op. cit., p. 160*
72- WEDEEN Lisa, "Acting 'As If': Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1998, vol. 40, p. 504.

> *"On any given day, Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad may be extolled as the nation's "premier" pharmacist, teacher, lawyer, or doctor; he may be pictured in the newspapers with foreign dignitaries, showing "complete understanding of all issues." Following elections he is congratulated for winning more than 99 percent of the vote. Routinely in official discourse, Asad appears as the "father," the "combatant," the "savior of Lebanon," the "leader forever," or the "gallant knight," the modern-day Salah al-Din, after the original who wrested Jerusalem from enemy control in 1187. Religious iconography and slogans attesting to his immortality bedeck the walls of buildings, the windows of taxi cabs, and the doors of restaurants"*[73].

Hafez Al-Assad's fearsome image slightly faded after his death, and his son Bashar was initially unable to match his father's charisma. The son tried to appear modern and open-minded, whether through activities that brought him closer to the public or through a fake openness to the West, capitalizing on his brief study experience in London and his appearance as a modern husband with his British-born wife. However, the image that Assad spent a decade building quickly crumbled when the protests erupted in Syria, revealing another image of him that he had long sought to conceal.

The depth and length of the conflict in Syria also revealed other dimensions of the son's image. This image is no longer limited to the symbolic image of the "leader" spread as part of the strict security propaganda measures, as was the case during the father's rule. However, the videos that went viral after the popular uprising in Syria reinforced this image.

Among the most notable of these elements, which added to the already fearsome image, were clips of the heavy bombardment of areas outside the regime's control. These clips were recorded by activists and later invaded media outlets and social media platforms.

However, the most prominent element in recreating the image of the fearsome is the testimonies of detainees released from the Syrian regime's prisons about torture practices. According to human rights reports, these practices already existed during Hafez Al-Assad's rule but were under-documented, while the uprising in Syria was able to record explicit and direct videos of these practices[74].

In a video posted on YouTube on April 14, 2011, a group of recently released prisoners, who were arrested for participating in demonstrations in the city of Baniyas, recounted the torture they were subjected to during their detention, revealing their faces for the first time. They also showed the whip marks, cuts and bruises on their bodies, which left deep scars[75].

In this video and dozens of others, detainees share their perhaps unfalsifiable testimonies for the first time. This is where videos can serve as irrefutable

73- WEDEEN Lisa, *op. cit.*, p. 504.

74- ZIADEH Radwan, *Power and Policy in Syria, Intelligence* Services, *Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East*, 2011, vol. 98, I.B. Tauris, p. 25.

75- CLIP 26. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/mu69oy6kiux2h3y84y57bhljw551hovz

documents, unlike during the regime of Hafez Al-Assad, during which the "fearsome" was a man of flesh and blood, so to speak, and not just anonymous rumors or incomplete testimonies not supported by photos and physical evidence.

Moreover, clips of the brutal torture itself, whether leaked or published, surfaced, such as the one posted on May 5, 2011, showing a group of soldiers stomping to death on the bloodied bodies of detainees[76].

In contrast to the occupation of the public space by the image of Hafez Al-Assad during his rule, as Lisa Wedeen mentioned, the regime of Bashar Al-Assad took over the public space with images of bombing, killing, and torture. These images are no longer limited to prisons, but have extended to the public space, as the regime has turned most facilities into detention facilities for those who rebel against its rule, such as official institutions, schools, and even means of transportation. In a clip showing the torture of prisoners in schools[77], a number of detainees appear to be sitting behind desks inside a school classroom and being cruelly tortured. This torture happened inside the classrooms they might have studied in or similar to the ones they might have studied in when they were students. In other clips, torture took place inside public transportation vehicles.

Because of these videos, the image of fear itself is now a harsh image that imagination makes even harsher due to the audiovisual materials, which are characterized by brutality and indistinctness, such as shaky, pixelated, blurred, stolen or leaked images as well as distorted sound.

This image, with all its imperfections, triggers the imagination to go beyond the real limits of the event. It builds on imagination and provokes it, turning fear into an absolute, infinite fear, capable of endlessly reproducing itself. This can be observed in the different examples of Syrian videos, from the clips showing peaceful protesters' fear of raids by security forces, to the clip showing a protester attempting to commit suicide to escape arrest by the security forces[78], which highlights the fact that he would have preferred to die rather than be arrested by the security forces.

In this sense, the new image of the fearsome that emerged after 2011 is a complex image that is no longer a mere substitute for the image of the strict and tyrannical regime's leader, as it was during the rule of Hafez Al-Assad, but now includes fascist images of torture that use the "pain of others" as a legitimate means of control.

76- CLIP 27. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/3om180e5az3j63y3ebkjpotnnamdkrsx
77- CLIP 28. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/a2i3mgtd9yru7f23mtwqv0rc3si4aj6p
78- CLIP 29. Available at: https://app.box.com/s/0uwsql8laxlgtg1g6rrbs3s40n5n35lv

Conclusion: The Utopia of Cinema

> *"The artistic image cannot be one-sided: in order justly to be called truthful, it has to unite within itself dialectically contradictory phenomena."*
> *Andrei Tarkovsky – Sculpting in Time*

> *The artistic image cannot be one-sided: in order justly to be called truthful, it has to unite within itself dialectically contradictory phenomena."*
> *Andrei Tarkovsky – Sculpting in Time*

In his book titled *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), French critic Roland Barthes argues that the writer is constrained when writing using his tool, language itself. He believes that the writer tries hard to create a free language, but "it comes back to him fabricated, for luxury is never innocent", and the writer must continue to use this luxurious yet deep language. Because of this, Barthes thinks that writing is "a blind alley" which can be overcome through "the search for a non-style or an oral style, for a zero level or a spoken level of writing", which leads to "Utopia of language"[79].It is not only literature that is constrained by the language it uses, but also film, which is constrained by the "luxurious" audiovisual language used by the filmmaker, although audiovisual language seems broader than the limited vocabulary found inside the dictionary. As Pier Paolo Pasolini explains in his theoretical essay *The Cinema of Poetry* (1976), audiovisual language has no limited vocabulary. It draws from an infinite reservoir of visual vocabulary sourced from the memories and dreams of the cinema author[80].

Is it possible for documentaries to reach their own utopia? Can the Syrian model be an example of the possibility for audiovisual language to reach absolute freedom, or for cinematic language to reach degree zero?

One of the main limitations of audiovisual language in documentaries is the concept of "performance" in its two dimensions: The performance of the filmmaker (both objective and subjective), and the performance of the filmed subject.

In her analysis of performative documentaries, writer Stella Bruzzi suggests that the filmmaker's relationship with their subject is purely performative. According to her, documentaries are "a negotiation between filmmaker and reality and, at heart, a performance," adding that the difference between traditional documentaries and new documentaries is the way in which the modes of production are exposed in each film:

> *"The traditional concept of documentary as striving to represent reality as faithfully as possible is predicated upon the realist assumption that the production process must be disguised, as was the case with direct cinema.*

79- BARTHES Roland, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

80- PASOLINI Pier Paolo, « The Cinema of Poetry », In NICHOLS Bill (ed.), Movies and Methods: An Anthology, *California*, University of California Press, 1976, p. 118.

> *Conversely, the new performative documentaries herald a different notion of documentary 'truth' that acknowledges the construction and artificiality of even the non-fiction film."*[81]

Thus, the audiovisual language of the documentary is limited by the filmmaker's performance, whether it is convincing, as in the case of Direct Cinema, Dogma Cinema, and other currents that seek to hide the "illusory" means. It is also the case in contemporary documentaries that do not see anything wrong with showcasing this means, exploit it artistically, and employ the filmmaker's performance artistically in the course of the film, as did directors such as Michael Moore and Nick Broomfield.

Perhaps the filmmaker's desire to present a faithful image of the reality they are portraying or, in other words, the obsession with objectivity, is what drives documentary filmmakers to this performance. However, objectivity, according to researcher Jay Ruby, seems to be a limitation that constrains the documentary and is irrelevant to it:

> *"(…) Documentary filmmakers have a social obligation to not be objective. The concept was inappropriately borrowed from the natural sciences – an idea which has little support from the social sciences. Both social scientists and documentary filmmakers are interpreters of the world."*[82]

Objectivity, however, is not the only factor that influences the filmmaker's performance; in fact, the filmmaker's subjectivity also seems to be one of the limitations of audiovisual language, despite the free and uncontrolled manifestations of subjectivity. The limitations imposed by the director's subjectivity are best exemplified and most apparent in "self-portrait" films in which the filmmaker is the subject themself.

This conflict between awareness of the camera's presence and the desire to fully expose oneself to it is evident in *A Whited Sepulchre*[83], a film by researcher and filmmaker Tony Dowmunt. In this film, he attempts to retrace the footsteps of his great-grandfather, who was a soldier in the British army in Sierra Leone at the end of last century and who left behind a problematic memoir. The journey to retrace his great-grandfather's footsteps becomes an arduous soul-searching journey that Dowmunt bravely undertakes, taking on the challenge of being exposed in front of the camera.

The act of breaking free of the chains of consciousness appears in brief moments in the film, most notably when Dowmunt wakes up panicked after a terrifying night to make a very frank confession to the camera about his fear and his vulnerability. In later writings, Dowmunt describes this as a scene that put him

81- BRUZZI Stella, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

82- RUBY Jay, « The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film », *Journal of the University Film Association*, 1977, vol. 29, p. 11.

83- DOWMUNT Tony, *A Whited Sepulchre*, 2008.

"at stake emotionally"[84].This honest revelation, devoid of any performance, is therefore the result of a psychological pressure that led the self to relinquish its performative-defensive tools. These moments of "emancipation" are indeed present in the documentaries, but they seem more as exceptions than rules.

The opposite end of the performance spectrum is the performance of the filmed subject. In their performance, the filmed subject appears more clearly, especially since there is a tacit agreement between the camera operator and their subject about the tone and form of this performance.

Author John Ellis argues that people always adapt their behavior to fit the circumstances and expectations of others. Ellis bases his conclusion on Erving Goffman's theories on the theatrical performance of ordinary people in everyday life in his first book, titled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). In this book, Goffman claims that all social human behaviors involve performance. Goffman based his arguments on a field experiment that involved observing the behavior of hotel workers in Scotland. He found that the relationships and behavior of the workers in the kitchen and in the back regions significantly differed from their behavior in the dining room of the restaurant during teatime. He describes this as the necessity of maintaining the British middle-class pattern, from body language to the way tea is served in the dining room, which is a widely expected behavioral pattern[85].According to Ellis, these behavioral changes are reflected in the documentary through the human face. He explains that as social beings, we always try to communicate through our faces what we think and believe to those we are addressing. We don't like to look embarrassed or to look a fool in any circumstance, so this interaction with others involves "elements of 'face work'"[86].Therefore, specifically in interview films, the awareness of the filmed subject is reflected as a performance that limits the viewer's sense of the character's authenticity. One of the most prominent examples of the attempt to disguise this performance can be found in Errol Morris's interview films, such as *Unknown Known*[87], a lengthy interview with former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. This film is widely seen as an attempt to condemn Rumsfeld through his facial features, using extreme close-ups of his face as he is cornered with controversial questions about the invasion of Iraq, for which Morris used revolutionary interviewing techniques[88].

Many questions arise about the honesty of the subject, especially the interviewee, in their relationship with the camera: Are they being honest or are they acting for the camera? Do they know that a camera is filming them? Are they behaving

84- DOWMUNT Tony, *A Whited Sepulchre: Autobiography and Video Diaries in 'Post-Documentary' Culture*. *op. cit., p. 175.*

85- GOFFMAN Erving, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1959, p. 110.

86- ELLIS John, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

87- MORRIS Errol, *The Unknown Known*. Radius-TWC, 2014.

88- Errol Morris created a special interviewing technique in his films, called "Interrotron," which enabled him to create a special interactive relationship between the director's eye and the interviewee's eye, or what is known as direct eye contact. You can read more about the technique mentioned in this interview with Errol Morris via the following link: https://www.errolmorris.com/content/eyecontact/interrotron.html

in a certain way to convey a message? Do they care about the way they look at that moment? Did the director ask them to behave this way? Is the lighting on their face natural or artificial? There are many other questions that have no single answer but answers that vary from one experience to another.

Of course, this does not mean that the main subjects featured in the documentary are always in a state of performance. In fact, at times, they are not even aware of the camera's presence, which eliminates the hypothesis of performance for the camera and leaves the hypothesis of social class performance, that Goffman explains above through behavioral patterns, as well as Ellis's theories on facial expressions.

Conversely, the moments in which the subject-person abandons their performance are the rare moments in which the film's audiovisual language is liberated, moments that Ellis believes are keenly perceived and highly valued by the contemporary viewer.

Thus, it is worth noting that, in addition to these limitations, the concept of performance, as we have discussed above, restricts the audiovisual language. It is also a wide creative space for documentary filmmakers, in line with John Grierson's original definition of the documentary film, set in the early 1920s, as a "creative treatment of actually"[89]. The positive aspect of this very broad definition has been the main driver of experimentation over the decades, leading to a wide variety of creative models ranging from docudramas to reality TV.

This is precisely why the total abandonment of performance does not seem easy, and the tendency of Nick Broomfield, Michael Moore [90]and other directors to expose their modes of production to the viewer is a sincere and creative attempt to circumvent this challenge, because, in Stella Bruzzi's ironic words, they realized that "such a masquerade is impossibly utopian[91].Stella Bruzzi and Roland Barthes use the word "utopia" in two different contexts: Bruzzi argues that its existence in documentary is impossible, while Barthes believes it is possible to reach it through "writing degree zero." Is it really possible for cinema to break free of all its constraints and reach the utopia of documentary?

Within this framework, the Syrian model presents a unique breach of the notion of performance in its two aspects: The filmmaker and the filmed subject. This is not due to a preconceived and conscious desire to be free from performance, but rather due to the pressure imposed by the current event, or in other words, by the "fatal event", which profoundly alters the relationship between the three parties: The camera operator, the filmed subject and the camera.

The performance of the filmmaker, whether subjective or objective, disappears to a certain extent in the face of death or near-death conditions, as the camera operator has no form of resistance or control over what happens in extreme situations of danger. They abandon the "traditions of production" and the audiovisual language accumulated over the years, and free themself from

89- GRIERSON John, Grierson on Documentary. California, University of California Press, 1966, p. 13.
90- Cf. MOORE Michael, *Fahrenheit* 2018 ,*11-9*; BROOMFIELD Nick, *Chicken Ranch*, 1982.
91- BRUZZI Stella, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

their conscious motives (political, for example). Instead, their motives are unconscious, with no goal other than survival and keeping the image "alive" until the last moment.

The filmed subject, on the other hand, unhesitatingly abandons "social performance" and relinquishes the lexicon of "facial expressions" and the other performative defenses that they used to protect themself under the pressure of the same dangerous situation. In fact, when faced with imminent death, they are no longer aware of the camera, and their only goal is to remain alive as well. This absence of performance gives the camera absolute technical and artistic freedom in the production of the image. It's as if it moved on its own to produce an expressive language free from all constraints, a language that corresponds to the camera operator's fear and the filmed subject's panic. The camera produces, in one of its most striking aspects, the characteristics of audiovisual language that we have devoted parts of the research to explore[92].

The videos included in the Syrian model, particularly those depicting the death of the filmmaker (camera operator, filmer, citizen journalist, author), seem to be a dual representation of a "highly objective subjectivity," in which extreme subjectivity results from the association of the image with the camera operator's most intimate worlds and their most primal fear: The fear of death. As for absolute objectivity, it results from the overwhelming dominance of the fatal event over objective vocabulary.

This absolute freedom sometimes only lasts for a few seconds, but it enables us to witness a cinematic language that is free from all constraints, spontaneous and harsh, shocking but deeply connected to reality, illogical but real, as if it flowed on its own uncontrollably and without even being able to be stopped. The language of documentary cinema crystallizes at the degree zero of life, or at the moment of death; only then can the "utopia of cinema" be achieved.

Naturally, this degree zero of documentary cinema is not achieved in all segments of the Syrian model, but it is present in many of them. These aesthetics become more apparent and obvious the closer the filmmaker gets to death, and they are most clearly represented in the clips where the camera operator dies. In these clips, the filmed subject and the camera operator are identical in the degree zero of life.

Thus, the distance with the fatal event governs the intertwined relationships between the various parties in the communication process, within a series of mutual influences, including the relationship between the camera operator's body and the camera, between the camera operator and themself, between the image and its subject, between the viewer and the subject, between the body and its image, between the event and its setting, between the image and its medium of presentation, between the viewer and themself, and the list goes on. When the distance between all these parties reaches zero, the utopia of cinema is achieved. Ironically, in this utopia, the image's immortality comes at the price of the life of the person who captures it.

92- Cf. Part III of the present paper.

In conclusion, this particular language produced by the Syrian model through millions of videos has certainly contributed to profound changes in the aesthetics of documentary cinema, especially in traditional visual media outlets. Media outlets today seem less rigid in terms of traditional image requirements despite their initial resistance to this new audiovisual reality. The real change, however, occurred in documentary filmmaking itself. This can be seen in many artistic experiments, most of which have become less focused on image quality at the expense of content and have freed themselves from the limitations of production. Furthermore, a change in the methods of expression and treatment has undoubtedly occurred as a result of the freedom of this new cinematic language. All these changes open up new possibilities for a multidimensional interpretation of the Syrian model in order to understand its impact on the contemporary aesthetics of documentary cinema.

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ملخّص | يتناول هذا البحث «السينما في الدرجة صفر» خلال الثورة السورية عام ٢٠١١. ويركز على كيفية مساهمة الصور منخفضة الدقة والتصوير المحمول يدوياً والصوت الطبيعي المحيط في تشكيل هوية سمعية بصرية مميزة في السينما الوثائقية. ومن خلال استخدام الأطر النظرية من رولان بارت وجون إليس وهيتو ستيرل، تضع الدراسة مقاطع فيديو الاحتجاج السورية في سياق المشهد الأوسع لموجات الأفلام الوثائقية وتياراتها الرئيسية. وتكشف عن تأثير التوثيق العفوي الذي يقوده المواطنون في مناطق الصراع وتفحص كيف تؤثر تجارب الخوف والقرب من الموت على الخصائص الفنية الجديدة في هذا النوع. وتسلط النتائج الضوء على الاستخدام المبتكر للتكنولوجيا والجماليات في تشكيل الصورة العامة للثورة، مما يشير إلى أن هذه العناصر لا تعيد تعريف الممارسات الوثائقية فحسب، بل تتحدى أيضًا السرديات التقليدية المحيطة بالصراعات السياسية. وفي نهاية المطاف، يساهم هذا البحث في فهم أعمق للتأثير المتبادل بين المواد السمعية البصرية وحركات التغيير الاجتماعي والسياسي، وخاصة في السياقات السياسية للبلدان التي تحكمها أنظمة دكتاتورية.

Dr. Zaher Omareen is a researcher and documentary filmmaker specializing in the intersection of art and conflict, with nearly 15 years of experience. His work focuses on the audiovisual aesthetics of geopolitical crises, covering events such as the Ukrainian War, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the Sudanese revolution. He holds a Ph.D. in Media and Communication from Goldsmiths, University of London, and a master's in media and Cultural Studies from the University of Sussex, along with dual bachelor's degrees in journalism and Drama from Damascus institutions. Dr. Omareen also publishes in academic journals and is the co-author of the PEN Award-winning book Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline.