

Critical Nationals: The Paradoxes of Syrian Cinema

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A Cinema of Many a Paradox

To Syrian film critics, historians of cinema and filmmakers alike, to speak of Syrian cinema, as a national cinema, smacks of hubris. Invariably, one is met with a retort that is some variation on “there is no Syrian cinema, there are only Syrian films and Syrian filmmakers.” In Meyar al-Roumi's *Un Cinéma Muet (A Silent Cinema, 2001)*, a documentary that interrogates the place relegated by the government to films and film production in contemporary social life in Syria, Syrian film critic Bandar Abdul-Hamid reiterates that claim. He speaks from the privileged position of first-hand, insider knowledge. If, objectively, Syrian cinema does not bear any of the attributes associated with a national cinema, an industry, or a sector in production of culture, when one views a significant selection of Syrian films from the past three decades, it is nonetheless very difficult to discount the cogent body of work produced by Syrian filmmakers as mere collection of “Syrian films and Syrian filmmakers.” That body of work performs the role of a national repository of aspirations and sentiments, the record of lived experience, collective memory and the realm where the saga of collective national traumas and shared canons find expression, representation and signification. This is the first paradox.

Nothing about the structure of film production, distribution, dissemination or the social life afforded to these films suggests that there is an industry to speak of: film production is almost entirely controlled by the state, resources are scarce, and the output is as humble as one or two films per year. Efforts at international and regional distribution for exhibition and dissemination at best are dismal and mostly non-existent, the local network of movie theaters, whether in the capital or the rest of the country, is gravely dysfunctional. When Syrian films travel to film festivals worldwide, they almost always garner critical acclaim and awards, but all initiatives for their screening originate from

outside their country. Inside their country, Syrian films are barely known. The national repository of aspirations and sentiments may be unabashedly genuine, piercing with honesty and enchanting with creativity, but they are remembered by a shy minority of stubborn cinephiles who have sought them out against the odds. This is the second paradox.

Amongst all fields of cultural production, Syrian cinema is the premier realm of artistic expression in contemporary Syria, where a lucid, intelligent and subversive critique of the state has forged a site for the manufacture of meaning and image. The remarkable feat accomplished by Syrian filmmakers is how they have succeeded in carving out an independent, critical and often subversive cinema under the sponsorship of a vigorous state ruled by a single party actively invested in suppressing dissent and coercing an official dogma. This is a state-sponsored cinema at the furthest possible remove from a cinema of propaganda or a cinema that serves to anchor and disseminate the tenets of the state's hegemony. This is the third paradox of Syrian cinema.

These three paradoxes are perceptible to those who begin to engage with Syrian cinema more closely. But they do not account for the surprise of those who come to encounter Syrian cinema for the first time and marvel at the cinematic gems, the plurality of genre, approach and voice, the mastery of the craft. Freed from the debilitating demands of the profit-generating creed of market-driven production, public funding has enabled Syrian cinema to revel as a medium of artistic expression in its own terms. What is often referred to as “Syrian cinema” effectively refers to the productions from the 1970s up to today and mostly means films of the “cinéma d'auteur” (produced from the 1980s until now). Thus is Syrian cinema a national cinema made up of profoundly subjective and independent-minded auteur films. This is the fourth paradox.

This essay will tell the story of Syrian cinema and attempt to disentangle these paradoxes. It will focus primarily on filmmakers who have started working since the 1980s, and conclude with a brief allusion to an emerging generation of filmmakers who are marking a sharp turn in this field of cultural production. Their work, although still in its budding stages deserves attention; it heralds a sweeping trend of radical change in filmmaking in the Arab world, but also across the region.

The Making of a National Cinema: A Cinema to Call their Own

Since the early 1960s the Syrian state has been actively invested in and held monopoly over film production, but the history of cinema in Syria extends much further back in

time. The first film to have ever been screened in Syria took place in a café in Aleppo in 1908. The Ottoman administration established the first movie theater in Damascus in 1916. It was inaugurated by the infamous Ottoman governor Jamal Pasha, but burned down barely a month later. By the time the colonial French mandate administration took over Syria, a number of movie theaters peppered Damascus's urban fabric.

The story of film production began in 1928, rehearsing the biography of film production in the Arab world, with Egypt holding the vanguard, pioneering role. By 1928, film houses and theaters were familiar to most urban centers, and attending film screenings had become a familiar social practice to the elite urban bourgeoisie. Historians of Syrian cinema cite the silent black and white feature *Al-Muttaham al-Baree'* (*The Innocent Suspect*, 1928) as the first Syrian film, specifically because it was produced entirely by Syrians. Only a year earlier, the first film had been produced in Egypt. *The Innocent Suspect* was thought of then, and is remembered now, as one of the many attempts by a nascent nationalist intelligentsia to defy the cultural dominion of the French rule and forge a national culture. The film was written, directed and filmed by Rashid Jalal, and produced by him with Ahmad Tello, Ayyoub Badri and Mohammad al-Muradi (who also comprised the cast of the film), under the auspices of the first film production company they formed, Hermon Film. Inspired by real events, it told the story of a band of thieves and thugs who terrorized the neighborhoods of Damascus. Working against insuperable odds to make the film, they regarded their labor as part and parcel of the struggle for national liberation. The artistry and technical command of *The Innocent Suspect* could not possibly match the numerous French productions screening in cinema houses at the time, and yet it was received with euphoria by the general public precisely because it was emblematic of the desire for independence and sovereignty. The French authorities in Syria—as the British authorities in Palestine—were apprehensive about the emergence of an indigenous cinema and tried, in vain, to prevent the screening.

Sadly, almost immediately after the release of the second black and white feature produced in the country, *Tahta Sama' Dimashq* (*Under the Damascus Sky*, 1934), Syrian cinema houses were conquered by Arabic-speaking Egyptian productions. *Under the Damascus Sky* was a silent feature that had been in production for two years and was widely publicized in the local press. Produced by Helios Films (another film production company established by Rashid Jalal in 1931), it was written and directed by Isma'íl Anzour. But it was overshadowed completely as its release coincided with the opening of the first Egyptian musical talkie, *Unshudat al-Fuad* (*Song of the Heart*, 1932) featuring a cast of prominent stars and singers. *Under the Damascus Sky* turned out to be a crushing commercial failure and was soon banned by the French mandate authorities. The production had exceeded initial budget allowances, but most punishing was a penalty fee

extracted by the French administration for the production's use of a musical piece without paying copyright dues.

At a time when Arabs had come into a collective consciousness of themselves in the tenor of an Arabist worldview, articulating their right to self-determination and sovereignty, and began to fight the onslaught of European colonial designs as a cultural group bound in solidarity by history and culture, Egyptian cinema was widely perceived as a cinema all Arabs could proudly claim as their own. Syrian nationalist fervor waned amongst the handful of producers, directors and actors, and under the lure of quick profits local entrepreneurs and financiers quickly transformed into importers and distributors of Egyptian productions. Like their Lebanese and Palestinian kin, Syrian talents migrated to Cairo and integrated into its booming film industry.

In 1947, a year following Syrian independence, Nazih Shahbandar established a film production studio furnished with equipment that he had mostly manufactured or modified and improved on himself. He produced the first Syrian talkie, *Nur wa Thalam* (*Light and Darkness*, 1948), a year later, written by Mohammad Shamel and Ali el-Arna'ut. Its cast of actors would later shine and acquire fame as Syrian cinema's film stars (Rafiq Shukri, Yvette Feghali, Anwar el-Baba, among others).

Local film production took off at a more regular pace by the middle of the 1950s, in the hands of private financiers and producers. At that time, it was mostly regarded as a commercial venture in pursuit by box-office receipts. Artistically, these productions took their cues from the commercial successes of the wealthier studios in Egypt. But returns were uneven as the problem of distribution proved an arduous challenge. By the mid-1960s significant profits were generated as the comedic duo Doreid Lahham and Nuhad al-Qala'i transposed their widely successful television serial (it was not called situation comedy then) into film. Beginning with *'Aqd al-Lulu* (*Necklace of Pearls*) in 1965, the duo produced numerous films, often at the rate of two per year. There was little creative effort invested in these burlesque comedies, tirelessly and faithfully crafted according to a simple single formula, and yet they garnered significant popular success.

Al-Mu'assassah al-'Ammah li al-Sinamah, or the National Film Organization, was instituted in 1963 as an independent arm of the Ministry of Culture to oversee the production, distribution, import and export of films in Syria. The immediate impetus for the establishment of the institution came from the demands of a politicized intelligentsia and groups of artists who expected their state to foster artistic production. Their aspirations and expectations were organically embedded in the prevailing ideological mindset of the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party that had seized power that year. The National

Film Organization repatriated some of the Syrian talent that had migrated to Egypt and summoned kin Arab nationals to assist in the establishment of a national structure for film production. In the context of a world polarized by the Cold War, and against the backdrop of humiliation and anger felt after the defeat of Arab armies in the war with Israel in 1967 (remembered bitterly as *Naksa*) and the loss of the territories of the Golan Heights to Israeli military occupation, the Syrian state became actively invested in monitoring and policing cultural production as well as disseminating its official discourse with vigor. Syrian society had long witnessed an active and plural political life, with a multitude of parties on the left and on the right competing for power and mobilized constituencies. Since independence from French rule however, the country had also endured a series of coups d'états and regime changes. The Ba'ath party's ideological proclivity for virile coercion of public discourse found legitimacy in the country's recent experience with political turbulence, allowing it to gradually marginalize, demonize and silence political dissent, democratic pluralism, and a critical engagement with authority. In 1969, the National Film Organization was granted a strict monopoly over production, distribution, import and export of films, while private ventures wilted until they became nearly extinct.

The prime force that had fueled private entrepreneurs to invest in film production—profit-making and box-office receipts—was suddenly rendered insignificant as the state effectively became the sole producer guided by an entirely different creed, namely, to invest in crafting of a national cinema. Film scripts once weighed by accountants and gauged against the measure of a balance sheet were now weighed by a censorship bureau and gauged against the dogma of a regime.

Filming the Nation

The Syrian intelligentsia at the helm understood the power of the medium. On the one hand, cinema was induced to play the simple and straightforward role of rescripting the nation, the country, its geographical diversity, its folk and their lore. Filmmakers were dispatched to the far corners of the country to celebrate in film, the beauty of the landscape, the wisdom of its people, their local particularisms, their crafts and customs. Filmmakers were also expected to document—and hail—the great achievements of the state, the construction of roads and highways, dams, the impact of agricultural reform, the provision of health services, housing and education. Thus the organization initially produced documentaries in large numbers, and by 1963 Syrian television had begun broadcasting and promoting the production of documentaries as well. Film clubs were

set-up in cities throughout the country and the National Film Organization oversaw their circulation.

The Arab world—masses and intelligentsia alike—were then gripped by revolutionary fervor, articulated in the vocabulary of socialism conjugated alternately with tenors of pan-Arab nationalism or local nationalism: Egypt in 1952, Iraq in 1958, Algeria in 1962 and Syria in 1963, but also, further afield Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Oman. The loss of Palestine and the dispersal of its people, the defeat of the Arab armies, first in 1948 and a second time in 1967, were endured with humiliation and anger, fueling revolutionary fervor. Syrian cinema was willed as a cinema that was socially and politically engaged, it was not crafted to entertain, it was impelled by a duty to crystallize the aspirations of the people and to represent their struggles.

After the Palestinian *Nakba* (Catastrophe) of 1948, Syria accepted expelled Palestinians as refugees to settle in camps around Damascus. After the defeat of 1967, or the *Naksa*, residents of the Golan Heights were themselves displaced overnight and turned into refugees. Filmmakers, like other artists and popular opinion at large, were captivated by the plight of their Palestinian brethren. The Syrian state had plural stakes in sponsoring the documentation of the tragedy of Palestine and used the medium of cinema to raise awareness in the world of that historic miscarriage of justice. The output of documentary films is impressive, amongst the most accomplished are those directed by Iraqi filmmaker, Qays al-Zubeydi. His films, to name two, *Bai'dan 'an al-Watan (Far from their Country, 1970)* and *Shahadat al-Filastinyyin fi Zaman al-Harb (Testimonies of Palestinians in the Time of War, 1972)* retraced, respectively, the lives of Palestinian children in refugee camps and the impact of 1967 on their parents. All these documentaries circulated throughout the Arab world with resounding impact.

By 1965, Palestinian political resistance movements emerged, reclaiming political agency and espousing armed struggle as the path to liberation. Palestinians then too cast their calling in the vocabulary of a transformative, regenerative political idiom, their movement of liberation became a revolution, and the Palestinian refugee, jolted from forgetting and misery was reborn as a freedom fighter, a *fida'i*. He was fearless in the face of death and unrelenting in his pursuit to redress injustice. He would coin a trope, a motif that would permeate a universe of shared canons throughout the Arab world. Everyday people, illiterate peasants, the poor and the *wretched of the earth*, were now at the core of the national imaginary in contrast with the sophisticated, educated urbanites who led the “national” struggle for liberation. In documentary and in fiction, Syrian cinema took it upon itself to sing those unsung heroes, the faceless and nameless martyrs of injustice.

Making Heroes from the 'People'

The first long fiction feature produced by the National Film Organization, entitled *Sa'eq al-Shahinah (The Lorry Driver, 1967)* told the saga of a poor man who tried to make a living as a truck driver and faced the greed of the company's owner and his abusive labor practices. Its author, filmmaker Počko Počkovic, who hailed from Yugoslavia, had joined the National Film Organization and lived in Syria. The film featured a narrative familiar to a society gripped by a political system that purported to redress social inequities. The central protagonist epitomized a small village working class hero, overcoming awesome adversity to pursue a life of dignity. Long feature fiction films also began to transcribe into cinema the novels of renowned Arab authors, today considered the great classics: Ghassan Kanafani, Haydar Haydar and Hanna Mina.

The ensuing productions garnered wide popular acclaim, to mention two, Nabil Maleh's *al-Fahd (The Leopard)*, based on a story by Haydar Haydar, released in 1972, and Tawfiq Saleh's *Al-Makhdu'un (The Dupes, 1972)*. *The Leopard*, Maleh's first full-length feature, told the story of a poor peasant jailed after his land is confiscated by wealthy landowners. He escapes from prison and fights back. Taking up arms, he hides in the mountains and becomes a hero redressing injustice and the abuses perpetrated on villagers in the region. While he wins their sympathy, he is unable to mobilize them to join him and remains alone. Eventually he is betrayed and hung in a public square to set an example. Film critics saw a lonely hero with echoes of Che Guevara, but his figure also strongly evoked the predicament of Palestinian peasants, betrayed by landowners and forced into a struggle with Israeli colonists. Like the hero of *The Lorry Driver*, the hero of *The Leopard* was forged in a cultural universe where the wretchedness of Arabs became conflated in symbol and signification with the actual tragedy of Palestinians. The tragic but real heroes of the contemporary Arab world, galvanized with the call for revolution, were no longer the nationalist urban intelligentsia, but poor simple peasants, whose unwavering commitment to challenge injustice was intuitive and fearless. *The Leopard* was awarded the first prize at the Locarno Film Festival, and the film's popularity remained unmatched until the late 1980s and early 1990s, with Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid's first two features, *Layali Ibn Awah (Nights of the Jackals, 1989)* and *Rassa'el Shafahiyya (Verbal Letters, 1991)*. Nabil Maleh's second feature, *Baqaya Suwar (Fragments, 1979)* also told the story of poor peasants captive to the tyranny of feudal landowners and poverty.

The National Film Organization had summoned Arab filmmakers to collaborate on productions in Syria. Most renowned was Tawfiq Saleh, an Egyptian filmmaker, also one

of the stellar figures associated with the trend of neo-realism in Egyptian cinema after the 1952 coup d'état, with landmark works such as *Yaomiyyat Na'eb Min al-Aryaf* (*Diary of a Country Prosecutor*, 1968), *Darb al-Mahabil* (*Fools' Alley*, 1955), *Siraa' al-Abtal* (*The Struggle of the Heroes*, 1962), *al-Mutamarridun* (*The Rebels*, 1968). Saleh's influence was defining for generations of Arab filmmakers. He adapted Ghassan Kanafani's canonical novella, *Men in the Sun*, in the film *The Dupes*. In a survey a decade ago, *The Dupes* was cited by a widely polled Arab audience as one of the top ten most important films in the twentieth century. The film told the story of three young Palestinian men captive to a bleak predicament in refugee camps, who decide to join the droves of Palestinians—and other Arab youth—to go and find their fortune in the booming, labor-hungry economies of the Gulf countries. Entry to these countries was then very cautiously policed. Without visas, the three men had no option but to smuggle themselves across the border. They hide in an emptied metal water barrel, in the back of a truck shuttling goods. Presuming the processing of papers at the border would only take ten or fifteen minutes, the truck driver covered the barrel at the crossing point. The story turns to tragedy when the guards at the crossing drag their feet and the truck is parked in the sun for much longer than a dozen minutes. The three young men asphyxiate in the heat of the desert, trapped in the barrel, their screams muffled by the locked lid.

Another notable set of fiction films produced in that era also borrowed their scripts from renowned Syrian novelists such as for instance, Qays el-Zubeydi's fiction feature *al-Yazerli* (*The Yazerli*, 1974), based on a novel by Hanna Mina. The film narrates the struggle of a family of recent migrants from the countryside who fend for their lives in the big city. This film, highlighting the uneven expansion of the economy and massive rural migration spurred by state-planned growth biased towards urban centers, typifies another common theme of socially engaged cinema of that period. Films cast everyday people, socially and culturally disempowered, overwhelmed, as they attempted to integrate into an urban polity, corrupt, unjust and alienating.

National Traumas and Auteur Cinema

In 1970, a radical wing in the Ba'th Party, self-styled as the “Correctionist Movement”, staged a coup and seated Hafiz al-Assad at the head of the government. It was comprised largely of disaffected elements from the military and security forces turned reactionary, who sought to enforce stability and consolidate power with the rule of a single party. They implemented more forcefully the “emergency measures” introduced in 1963.⁶ In 1973, the

October War between Arab states and Israel resulted in another defeat that strengthened the hold of the Israeli state over the Syrian territory of the Golan Heights.

The *Nakba* of 1948, the *Naksa* of 1967 register as traumas to Palestinians in particular, but also to Arabs in general. The October War of 1973 is particularly traumatic to Syrians as their defeat marked the definitive loss of the Golan. On the political scale they are the markers of humiliating defeat in the face of the Israeli state and thus of an injured Arab self-image. On the collective social scale they signpost the displacement of hapless, poor people, their expulsion and unsettled settlement elsewhere in the Arab realm, a chronological register of their experience of denizenship. In the articulations of enduring “humiliation” and recovering from injured self-image, the notion of “betrayal” occupied a vital space: people were betrayed by their governments, soldiers by their military command, and individual Arab states were betrayed by their fellow Arab allies. The question of Palestine, the lived experience of struggle for its liberation and bearing witness to the historic injustice, have occupied a foundational position in the universe of modern Arab consciousness. That central position, loaded with its many significations, is encapsulated in the saying, “Palestine as a metaphor.” As with all metaphors traveling in time and the particularisms of localities and subcultures, its signifying power multiplied and conjugated with lived experience and the representations of other traumas. In recovering from an injured self-image, the metaphor of Palestine was a key motif for citizens to question the legitimacy of the rule of their own regimes. At the same time, self-appointed ruling power elites used that same aspiration for recovery to ground the legitimacy of their undemocratic seizure of power and authoritarian governance in the metaphor of Palestine. Arab regimes subverted vital resources from attending to pressing social problems, to invest heavily in building their defense forces in the name of that metaphor. The metaphor's powerful evocation was used simultaneously by those in the seat of rule and those dissenting.

In the lexical universe of Syrian cinema as the repository of national sentiments, collective aspirations and traumas, the script of history and the record of cultural identity, the metaphor of Palestine was a vital idiom. Precisely because of its structure as a metaphor, its evocative power unraveled and thrived within one of the fundamental paradoxes that shapes Syrian cinema. Namely, a state-sponsored cinema whose most renowned filmmakers offered an alternative, critical and subversive narrative of the “national” lived experience of traumas that directly contested the official state-enforced discourse. The evocative power of the metaphor provided a space where traumas specific to the contemporary Syrian realm were narrated anew. Almost invariably, the metaphor of Palestine was either in the foreground or in the background of virtually every film

produced after 1980, it was central to the dramatic construction of the story or of the characters.

In the humble lot of films produced in the 1970s, these traumatic milestones were either featured at center stage or in the background, but they were written into scripts as objective historical events. Their metaphoric power only began to appear in what critics have identified as the “auteur” turn in Syrian cinema which dates to the 1980s.

In the 1960s, when establishing the infrastructure for film production sought skill and expertise, Cairo was the only Arab city to provide educational and technical training in cinema. By the late 1960s, the National Film Organization and the Syrian state provided scholarships for young talents to study in the Soviet Union (mostly Moscow and Kiev) and the Eastern Block. Nabil Maleh was one of the first to earn a degree in Czechoslovakia and return to find work in Syria in the mid-1960s. Samir Zikra graduated from the famous Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK), in 1973, followed by Mohammad Malas in 1974, Oussama Mohammad in 1979, Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid in 1981. This second wave of Syrian filmmakers who repatriated after their studies to produce the most challenging and exciting works that make up Syrian cinema, are the generation whose work constitutes the *cinéma d'auteur*.

Beginning with Samir Zikra's *Hadithat al-Nosf Metr (The Half Meter Incident)* in 1980, storylines of psychological drama weaved protagonists' lived experience with traumatic historical moments. The drama of history resonated with interior psychological drama as the subjectivity of characters took center stage in plot lines. A number of these films were autobiographical, full-fledgedly or to some extent, but most were set close to the native home of the filmmaker. The grand sweep of history found itself retold in the modest experience of simple folk, its traumatic upheavals narrated in the canon of coming of age stories, set in the filmmaker's native hometown or small village. The first film to confirm the auteur trend with self-assurance and to cast explicitly the filmmaker's own biography, was Mohammad Malas's *Ahlam al-Madina (Dreams of the City)*, released in 1983. Unabashedly subjective, visually captivating, the film was staged against the backdrop of the coup d'états that punctuated the early history of the modern Syrian state in the 1950s. It tells the sad story of a recently widowed young mother and her two sons who are forced to move from their native village to Damascus and live with their stingy and brutal grandfather. The film narrates the moment of the end of innocence for the generation that would come into full-fledged adulthood around the time of the “national traumas” that laid the ground for the Ba'th coming to power in 1963, the *Naksa* and the 1970 coup d'état. Deeb, aged thirteen or so and the eldest of two sons is the central protagonist, but orbiting around him, secondary characters are granted full enough body for the film to

represent a rich mosaic of a popular neighborhood in Damascus as the city grapples with political upheaval. Among the reasons *Dreams of the City* is regarded as a subversive film is the manner in which the history of that time is re-written, namely in a vein that does not agree with—even runs counter to—the official version endorsed by the regime. Although spoken in the subjective, personal voice of a single protagonist, it resonates loudly with a collective memory of the experience of these political events and the rich plurality of that experience is restored to its full truth, without nostalgic reconfiguration. In that small street where young Deeb comes of age, we find young men who are Arab nationalists, communists, and Ba‘thists. Some he looks up to and others he fears, some are handsome, others not, some greedy, some gentle, some virile, funny and violent. Almost all are chauvinists, and almost all carry their political commitments openly. That small neighborhood of Damascus in the 1950s is resurrected in its full color and lore without nostalgic idealization. So are defining political moments, such as the short-lived unification between Egypt and Syria and its dissolution. These moments, as others, are cast in the film from the perspective of that humble street and its everyday folk. They punctuate Deeb's passage to manhood, they are as much external events as they are internalized by the young man, as they shape his consciousness of himself and of the world.

Less autobiographical, but nevertheless very close to home, three of Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid's films are set in the countryside from which he hails, the rural environs of the southern port city of Lattakia. In *Layali Ibn Awah (Nights of the Jackals, 1989)*, *Rassa'el Shafahiyya (Verbal Letters, 1991)* and *Ma Yatlubuhu al-Mustami'un (At Our Listeners' Request, 2003)*, the loss of innocence does not coincide with protagonists coming of age, but rather with the nation dispatching its handsome and able men to the frontlines of war only to return in coffins. While seasons come and go, and the price of harvested vegetables and fruits fluctuates with cruel arbitrariness—because the logic of planned economic growth betrays first defenseless poor peasants—the nation seems to be in a tireless state of a protracted war with Israel. In *Nights of the Jackals* and *At Our Listeners' Request*, the “good” son of the family is suddenly called to military service, just as his family is struggling to cope with the everyday hardships that life delivers. When he is returned in a coffin, an irreversible spell of tragedy is cast over the village and the family's destiny.

Abdul-Hamid's cinema is so removed from didacticism and dogma, it feels weightless in its freshness. His dialogue and plot so spontaneously laced with derision, the comedy is effortless, natural. There are no heroes to be sung or unsung, just everyday people with vices and virtues, mood swings, eruptions of gruffness and tenderness; there no are denunciatory speech acts and no staged symbolism. Not only does Abdul-Hamid write

history with a lowercase h, he casts it as an infelicitous minor twist in the plot that frustrates commonplace events of life, such as a man's courtship with his beloved. In *At Our Listeners' Request*, residents of a village gather ritually every Tuesday morning under a large tree in Abou Jamal's backyard to catch their favorite radio program on the only radio set in the village. The program, broadcast from Damascus, features song requests and messages from listeners throughout the country. Every one of the villagers has a story with a song, they all wait with bated breath to hear their request and messages broadcast on air. Week after week, Saleh crosses the fields to Abou Jamal's backyard expecting to hear the song his beloved Wathifeh asked him to request as a proof of his love. She will not marry him unless they play it. One time, just as his song begins to play, the broadcast is interrupted by a newscaster somberly announcing the Syrian army's swift action to thwart an air assault by the Israeli army. Saleh returns to his work disappointed. The following week, the program is cancelled because the live transmission of man's landing on the moon is being broadcast. Crestfallen, he walks back to work where Wathifeh waits eagerly for an answer. When the poor man announces to her that the song was not broadcast because an American man landed on the moon, she gets really angry at his outlandish excuses and turns him down for good. What the entire world remembers as a "great leap for mankind," Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid casts as an irritating setback to the flowering of love between two poor peasants in the Syrian countryside.

As people are put at center stage, the patriotic calling of history—a motif in state official discourse—is not only writ small, its self-righteous claim to overpower people's lives, aspirations and dreams is subverted. The wars that punctuate Syria's contemporary history are not venues for grand-standing heroism, they are represented as tragic chapters that snatch the young and brightest, if not the most able, from life, from their kin and beloved. In *Nights of the Jackals* and *At Our Listeners' Requests*, the pomp and circumstance that accompanies state-sponsored funerals for fallen soldiers rings hollow as their surviving kin and fellow villagers collectively contemplate the loss of innocence. In *Nights of the Jackals*, the young son's death causes his mother's heart to give out. In *At Our Listeners' Request* the young son's death leads his best friend Salim to commit suicide. These "coming of age" and "end of innocence" motifs are the cinematic and story-telling devices that express the critical awakening to the failed promises once pledged by the regime. They are one of the many ways in which auteur filmmakers carved out a site for critique and subversion.

Auteur Cinema: the Site for Critique and Subversion

The storylines and plots of auteur films marked a turning away from grand narratives of heroism and glory inspired by the official record of “national” victories or achievements. Cinema became the repository of thwarted “national” aspirations, failed promises, and disillusioned subjectivity and citizenship. Its lens became critical, it began to furrow in the cracks and fissures of the social construct, unearthing the disruption between official discourse and lived experience, the national paradigm as it were, and its unfolding in everyday reality. This generation of filmmakers were self-conscious social agents, products of a society—and its structures—that had endured severe upheaval, intent on telling their own stories and the stories of their kin, animated to reclaim representation of themselves and their fellow citizens, to relocate themselves in the national universe and write themselves into its historical unfolding. The social fabric of every locale was transcribed in the full body of its complexity. In the rhythm of every frame, every line of dialogue, filmmakers consciously, carefully represented and narrated contemporary Syria—even when the films were not set in a contemporaneous instance in history—that challenged, undermined and satirized official discourse and state dogma. Furthermore, they were no longer motivated to sing unsung heroes, the nameless and faceless as did the cinema of the 1970s, rather, the motive was to represent the people's history and write people into history. And this is another way in which auteur cinema manufactured images and meanings that were deemed critical and subversive.

Evocations of the tragedy of Palestine permeate the basic storylines to build dramatic resonance, but also to defy and subvert its appropriation in the discourse of the regime. In Mohammad Malas's *Al-Leyl (The Night, 1993)*, the main character is a man trying to recover the lost memory/biography of his father, a poor peasant who had voluntarily joined the ranks of rebels—as did hundreds of peasants in the region—in the 1936 Great Revolt in Palestine. On his way to Palestine, his father had stopped in the village of Quneytra, where his father had met the young woman who was to become his mother, and on his way back, he returned to marry her. As the young man endures humiliation in his own life, his troubles echo the hardship and humiliation that his father endured after he settled in Quneytra. The film does not aim at restoring heroism to forgotten heroes, far from it: with humility and eloquence, it gives the tragedy of Palestine and its struggle for liberation the face of a peasant, the build of a man, his wife and his son. It humbles that struggle to the size of the body and flesh of a fighter who was also a subject of the Syrian state, a citizen, a laborer, a father and a husband. The loss of his memory/biography is an erasure from of the script of official history—self-congratulating and triumphalist. And the experience of the son's reclaiming of his father's story is coupled with enduring humiliation and disillusionment, precisely because all representation of the tragedy of

Palestine and the struggle for its liberation (hence the state of war between Syria and Israel), are regarded by the regime as its exclusive dominion and a crucial anchor in the legitimation of its autocratic, iron-fisted rule.

The permanent state of war between Syria and Israel, the consequence of which is the militarization of society, systematic policing of all avenues of citizenship and the continued enforcement of emergency laws, are contained within evocations of Palestine as a metaphor in auteur cinema. It is a hemorrhaging wound in the collective experience of Syrians, not only because of solidarity with Palestinian brethren, but also because they have sacrificed and endured so much for the liberation of Palestine. What they have voluntarily given up is discarded from the official script, and what they are coerced to endure has done nothing to liberate Palestine. Worse, it has held them captive to poverty, illiteracy and misery. Furthermore, the loss of the Golan persists as an open wound. All evocations of the Golan, the loss of territory, the displacement of its people, the dispersal of the memory is also deemed subversive because it too falls under the exclusive dominion of the regime's representation and narrative. Much as Palestine was abstracted into political idiom in official ideology, so too was the Golan. Auteur films have not shied away from reclaiming that geography in the flesh of its people and their hardships. The village of Quneitra is a particularly poignant location because it is where the Syrian army issued orders to retreat in the face of Israeli might and barbaric destruction; in other words, it is the site of defeat. It is now a destroyed vestige, severed by the border between Syria and Israel. In Ghassan Shmeit's *Shay' Ma Yahtareq* (*Something is Smoldering*, 1993), Quneitra is continuously present, not quite as the actual setting for the film, but as the lost home of the characters in the plot. The story narrates the painful uprooting of a family from Quneitra, and the irremediable suffering—emotional, psychological and physical—that plagues the father who seems unable to make a life for himself and his kin elsewhere in the country, relentlessly hounded by the humiliating brunt of poverty and disempowerment.

Yet another site that registers as a stage for national trauma, and whose evocation echoes in similar ways, is the city of Hama, where Hafiz al-Assad's regime orchestrated a bloodbath of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1980. The very fact of staging a fiction feature in the city is deemed as treading on dangerous ground, both for its defiance of the regime's obscuring of the massacre's geographical theater and for acknowledging its traumatic memory. Both Rémond Boutros's *al-Tahaleb* (*The Greedy Ones*, 1991) and *al-Tirhal* (*Exodus*, 1997) are set in Hama, the filmmaker's hometown. In the former, morally corrupt siblings teeter between cynicism and ineptitude as they fight over inherited property. In the latter, set in a the same historical timeframe as Malas's *Dreams of the*

City, a man working as a stone-carver struggles between making a living and escaping the grip of the secret police.

Perhaps the most salient motif that permeates Syrian auteur cinema is the figure of the patriarch who exercises his rule over the fate of his family and kin with absolute authority and administers violence almost arbitrarily. In Mohammad Malas' *Dreams of the City*, Oussama Mohammad's *Nujum al-Nahar (Stars in Broad Daylight, 1988)* and *Sunduq al-Dunya (Sacrifices, 2002)*, Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid's *Nights of the Jackals, Verbal Letters* and *At Our Listeners' Request*, we find a family (the nuclear casing for society), where the figure of a patriarch (father, grandfather or eldest son) wields overwhelming power. If characters fail at over-ruling his authority, the filmmakers use plot twists and imagery to interrogate, deride and indict it, particularly in instances of violence and abuse. The intersection in the allegorical symbolism between the absolute-patriarch and the autocratic ruler—charismatic he may be or not—is certainly a salient trope familiar to Arab cinema, as well as Arab literature (to say nothing of other world cinemas). Syrian auteur filmmakers have consciously engaged in a profound critique of patriarchy as well as a critique of absolute rule, precisely as it articulates in Syria through the iron grip of a junta commanding the armed forces. In *Stars in Broad Daylight*, the resemblance between the patriarch and Hafiz al-Assad is too striking to ignore. The patriarch, one of the brothers in a large family, is played by filmmaker Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid. The man works as a telephone operator in the city near his native village where the family resides. He listens in on everyone's conversations with impunity, a scornful twist on the security forces' (*mukhabarat*) compulsive spying on citizens.

In *Nights of the Jackals* and *Verbal Letters*, the patriarch has direct ties to the military and his authoritarian rule over his family rehearses the austere disciplinarian practices of the army corps. He claims moral high ground and legitimizes his absolute power by reference to having served on the frontlines in Syria's wars. In *Nights of the Jackals*, the father, who once served as a reservist in the Syrian military, is a disciplinarian patriarch perpetually angry and foul administering the everyday affairs of his family as if it were a small army platoon. But the story does not end there. At night, the howling of jackals in nearby fields prevents him from sleeping, and they can only be silenced by a particularly strong whistle. To his great misfortune, he cannot produce that whistle, only his wife can, and in order for him to get a full night's restful sleep, he must plead with her to do it and scare the jackals away. Thus his self-assured power subverted, and the man who exercises unadulterated authority during the day must cajole his wife—one of the victims of his abuse—with humility.

The link between patriarchy as a foundational force shaping social relations and the militarization of society was eloquently and overtly depicted in Oussama Mohammad's first film, a short documentary titled *Khutwa Khutwa (Step by Step, 1978)*. Step by step, Mohammad follows young boys in the countryside, tilling the land, tending to cattle, going to school, growing into young men, and enlisting in the military. Step by step, Mohammad documents how poor boys from the countryside transform from citizens to soldiers in search of a better living than misery on their farmland. In his second feature, *Sacrifices*, a father who served as a soldier on the front, returns home in the dark of a rain-drenched night to his wife, son and immediate kin who live in a large mud house in a remote village. In the next sequence we see him seated in the midst of a circle of relatives telling stories of his exploits. They listen breathlessly, particularly smitten by the citizen-soldier's story of seeing the nation's great leader in the flesh for the first time at a huge political rally. His journey home had been so long, he could not remember how long he had been walking, and sullied with mud and exhausted, he asks his wife to draw a bath for him. As she scrubs and lathers, mud slides off him onto the ground and his young son watches and waits for his father, the hero, to emerge clean and proud from under the dirt. In the next sequence, the camera circles around the chamber where the citizen-soldier is being cleaned; the son is still standing expectantly, but suddenly he freezes in astonishment. We discover as he does, a huge pile of mud stacked in the place of the father's body. The water that was supposed to wash away the dirt covering the figure of the soldier, the hero, instead revealed that there is only mud, no man, no soldier and no hero. In *Sacrifices*, the metaphor of the soldier-citizen comes full circle, to closure.

The militarization of society and ideological indoctrination with the nation's great military feats are openly ridiculed. In *At Our Listeners' Request*, the radio broadcast from Damascus is interrupted the first time with news that the Syrian army downed Israeli planes. While the villagers waiting to hear their song requests suddenly burst in patriotic celebration, the spectators know all too well this never happened. The fake newscast is not only comedic, it also thickens the weight of tragedy at the end of the movie when the handsome son returns from the battlefield in a coffin. In *Stars in Broad Daylight*, the ridicule is pushed to caricature. In a wedding celebration sequence, the patriarch (who bears a striking resemblance to Hafiz al-Assad) pushes his twin boys, barely five or six years old, to the microphone to recite a "patriotic poem." Like trained monkeys, they sing in unison:

Papa got me a gift, a tank and rifle, me and my brother are small children, we learned how to join the army of liberation, in the army of liberation we learned how to protect our land. Down with Israel, long live the Arab nation.

Their father, watching, glows with self-righteous pride. His younger brother Kasser, by contrast flees to Damascus looking for a better future and stays with his cousin, a soldier in the army who served on the “front.” As they snuggle into sleep, Kasser asks his cousin about the great enemy, Israel. With sarcasm, bitterness and cynicism, the soldier paints a picture of the stale-mated confrontation, entirely antithetical to the regime's version. He tells him that soldiers perform guard duty day and night bored out of their wits, and that the most that happens is banter and insults hurled across the border.

From the figure of the lone renegade hero who defends the powerless and defies tyranny, the people's combatant echoing the Palestinian *feda'i* minted in the cinema of the 1970s, the cinema 1980s and 1990s delivers a rude awakening: the poor defenseless peasant is a soldier, whether he chooses to be one or not, and instead of redressing injustice, he gets caught in the system that reinforces it. As a child, he awakens to a world shaped by patriarchy, and as an adult, he comes to consciousness in world shaped by a political dogma that is entirely detached from his reality. And when he becomes a father, he is likely to become the patriarch his own father was. In *Step by Step*, the filmmaker asks a young peasant recently conscripted for military service if he would kill his kin if they were accused of treason. Without hesitation, the peasant turned soldier replies in the affirmative.

Representation and Censorship

Since its inception, the National Film Organization has had meager resources and could not produce more than one or two long fiction features per year and a couple of short films (fiction and documentary). With its cautious control over the production of representation and signification, film production is bogged down by bureaucratic procedures that are arduous, tedious and sometimes debilitating. Filmmakers lament feeling hostage to a system that affords them dismal yet steady financial and social security, but drains their creative energy, relentlessly policing their craft and artistry. Film scripts have to earn the seal of approval from committees, undergo endless petty trials, revisions and discussion, before making it onto the list of projects endorsed by the National Film Organization. On average, filmmakers of that generation have been able to produce no more than two films over the two decades since their return to Syria and joining the body of the General Organization.*

Most of the red lines drawn by the censors are clear to the filmmakers. Their challenge has always been to operate through guises, stratagems, allegory and metaphor. From the

beginning of production, film scripts have to pass that test, and at the conclusion of production, films are screened for a gathering of officials, high-ranking cadres in the Ba'ath and other dignitaries of the state before the film is granted permission to be screened publicly. Some films pass the first test, but not the second. *Stars in Broad Daylight* was deemed to have "failed" a second such test. The film was not officially censored by the Syrian regime, but it was not granted permission to be released in movie theaters country-wide. The film traveled outside the borders of Syria to prestigious festivals worldwide, earned awards and acclaim.

Amongst the films that were banned from screening is Omar Amiralay's *al-Hayat al-Yaomiyah fi Qarya Suriyya (Everyday Life in A Syrian Village)* finished in 1974. It was Amiralay's second film, conceived in collaboration with late Syrian playwright and essayist Sa'adallah Wannus. Produced by the National Film Organization, the film delivered a scathing critique of the regime and denounced the failure of its policies. Amiralay has since established himself as a pioneering master-craftsman in documentary filmmaking in the Arab world.

Everyday Life in A Syrian Village was shot in a remote village in the Syrian hinterland, and depicted the living conditions of its dwellers, giving voice to people who had never been granted any regard, let alone a microphone. The film documented the failing of a national project that heralded great transformation, progress and social redress, showing how the Ba'athist regime grafted itself onto and strengthened tribal and patriarchal bonds and their structures rather than fulfill the promise of bringing equality amongst subjects. The film also reveals a state more invested in policing people than in providing health services, education, jobs and a life of dignity. If the film remains banned to this day in Syria, its power remains undimmed. The next documentary he produced, *Al-Dajaj (The Chickens, 1978)*, was yet another jab at state policy and its official discourse. Produced by Syrian television, it was also banned.

Since then, Amiralay has been working independently of any funding from any Syrian public or government related entity. In addition to his staunch dedication to claiming for documentary cinema an equal footing with fiction cinema in the Arab world, he has been a pioneer in defending independent production in Syria (as well as an inspiration for an emerging generation of independent filmmakers). Amiralay has continued to work in Syria and elsewhere, never flinching from his political commitments to the values of democracy, justice and equality; his courage and boldness unmatched. His most recent film, *Tufan fi Balad al-Ba'ath (A Flood in Baath Country, 2003)* is possibly the most explicit and compelling critique yet of Ba'athist ideology and the party's unforgiving absolute dominion over Syrian political life. The film's power lies in its disarming

simplicity. Interviews with Ba'ath party officials whose job it is to coerce dogma to the constituency in their locale and represent their constituency's interests and concerns in state and party structures unravel to reveal the contradictions, the violence and the obsolescence of the ideology. The film also marks a closure in Amiralay's filmography because he chose to return to the village where he shot his first ever documentary, in 1970, for the General Organization, titled *Film-Muhawala 'an Sadd al-Furat (Film-Essay on the Euphrates River Dam)*. Amiralay was then a young man filled with fervor and eager to document the big infrastructure projects undertaken by the Syrian state that promised to modernize distribution of water resources and bring electricity to rural areas. Several villages were flooded and new towns were built to accommodate displaced peasants. Thirty three years later, the filmmaker went back to film life in those villages, using the representation of that earlier time as a poignant yardstick for evaluating the regime and grounding critique from the living conditions of those deemed to be the popular core of the Ba'ath.

Most of the filmmakers cited so far in this essay as the authors of stellar auteur films, have also directed documentary films. However, the fiction genre has been their preferred venue for filmmaking. Omar Amiralay is the only filmmaker in Syria to have directed only documentary films. He toyed with the idea of making fiction films; in the early 1990s he worked on a script inspired by the biography of the mythical singer Asmahan but the film never took off. As the years have gone by, he has grown increasingly skeptical of fiction cinema. Nonetheless, he has been intimately involved in the production of several fiction films, drawn by the deep ties of friendship that link him to his peers like Mohammad Malas and Oussama Mohammad. Although his documentary filmmaking is never screened publicly in Syria, and his films have been made outside the confines of the National Organization's administrative and technical purview, he is at the center of the canon of Syrian auteur cinema. There is a tangible kinship in the recurrence of themes and approach between his work and the work of his peers in auteur fiction. One could easily speculate that *Everyday Life in A Syrian Village* and *The Chickens* are far closer in their approach to the representation of everyday folk in *Dreams of the City*, *Stars in Broad Daylight*, *Nights of the Jackals*, to cite a few, than in the cinema of the 1970s. The two main characters filmed in *A Flood in Baath Country*, namely the tribal chief turned parliamentary representative and the school headmaster, are in cogent lineage with the effigy of the patriarch-citizen-soldier that recurs in auteur films.

The Third Way: A Shining Path?

The generation of auteur filmmakers still dominates cinematic production in Syria. The National Film Organization remains the predominant producer of films, although for a little less than a decade now, coproductions have been permitted. Oussama Mohammad's second feature, *Sacrifices*, is one such recent example. It was co-produced by the National Organization, Arte (the French-German cable television channel) and a private French production company. Moreover, in the past three years, a number of filmmakers now estranged from the National Film Organization, like Mohammad Malas and Nabil Maleh, have relied fully on private sources of funding. The increasing currency of high definition digital video has already expanded the horizon of possibilities, and promises more in the future, because production budgets have become significantly reduced. Malas's most recent feature, *Bab el-Maqam (Passion)*, released in 2004, was shot with a digital camera, as was Nabil Maleh's *Hunt Feast* (still due for release). As everywhere else in the world, digital technology promises to bring a revolution in filmmaking and open an uncharted horizon of possibilities.

A third wave? Perhaps more like a third way. The last of the crop to graduate from the VGIK was Nidal el-Dibs. Upon his repatriation to Syria, he joined the National Film Organization and produced his first short film, *Ya Leyl Ya 'Ayn (Oh Night)* in 1999. The film earned popular success unusual with short films when it screened commercially in Syria; it also toured a number of international festivals and earned a number of awards. El-Dibs has just released his first fiction feature, *Tahta al-Saqf (Under the Ceiling, 2005)*, which is presently touring the festivals. He has also shot a short documentary for UNICEF on poverty-stricken children in Syria, which has roused the ire of the authorities. *Under the Ceiling* transposes on screen the angst of el-Dibs's experience with citizenship and subjectivity in Syria. A decade younger than the generation of auteur filmmakers, his coming of age occurred after the early 1980s and the regime's violent campaign of repression against the Muslim Brotherhood, independent and dissident unions and political parties on the left. His own generational peers have nearly all been drafted to work in the sector of private television production. At the beginning of the 1990s, both Syrian television and film production were well-set to accommodate co-productions with funds from the private sector, in addition to launching into satellite broadcasting and acquiring region-wide and worldwide viewership. Until then Egypt had claimed near absolute hegemony over production of serials in the region.

There is a long-standing history of Syrian television hiring directors trained as filmmakers for production of drama and historical serials. Veteran auteur filmmakers like Nabil Maleh, Omar Amiralay and Mohammad Malas directed documentaries for Syrian

television, but for reasons of political disagreements, they became estranged from the administration of the television station. The satellite broadcast of Syrian television suddenly expanded viewership to the entirety of the Arab region, multiplying exposure by thousands-fold overnight. The airing of Haytham Haqqi's *Khan al-Harir (The Silk Khan)* in 1992, made it an overnight sensation; Arab audiences discovered with delighted surprise a dramatic historical series with unparalleled production standards. Haytham Haqqi, a graduate from the VGIK, has shone and continues to stand apart with his stellar productions. Consequently, the producers of television serials were emboldened to invest in production and now threaten to unseat Egyptian productions from the lead position (much to the ire of Egyptian producers and Egyptian media). Attracted by the lure of regional fame and financial reward, a number of filmmakers from Nidal el-Dibs's generation have turned to television instead of cinema. Over a decade later, Syrian serials continue to garner popularity but their quality is highly uneven. The boom in production has not inspired the establishment of sound structures for an industry, rather the opposite has occurred. The sector is ruled by the chaos of market speculation unharnessed by regulation and animated by greed.

In the past couple of years, works by other Syrian filmmakers have begun to appear in international festivals of short, experimental and documentary films. In comparison to the generation of auteur filmmakers, they have made their films at a much younger age; they are in their twenties or early thirties. Meyar al-Roumi and Joude Gorani studied in France, Hisham al-Z'ouki studied in Norway, Husam Chadat studied in Germany, Fuad Nirabia studied in Canada while 'Ammar el-Beik and Diana el-Jeiroudi came to cinema almost by accident, without formal training. All are absolutely undaunted by the prospect of joining the National Film Organization. They are unabashed about experimenting with form, social and political critique and the search for their own voice and vocabulary. Despite their self-conscious distancing from the National Film Organization, and the rare opportunities for engaging with the work of their elder peers, many have collaborated with them on their films. To cite a few cases, 'Ammar el-Beik worked as an assistant to Mohammad Malas on the set of *Passion*, Meyar al-Roumi worked as director of photography on *A Flood in Baath Country*, and Joude Gorani worked as director of photography on Nidal el-Dibs's documentary for UNICEF.

They transit between Europe and Syria, relentlessly interrogating artistic and cultural expression in contemporary Syria, collective memory, the violence of the present regime, the overwhelming alienation of their generation, and the virtues of exile. In vocabulary, syntax, form and visual culture they are closer to their generational kin using digital video in Beirut, Cairo, Ramallah, Haifa, Casablanca and Algiers. So does this herald the end for the national chapter for Syrian cinema? A new chapter seems to unfold in almost every

Arab country with each generation of filmmakers and videomakers. That revolution will not be televised, but digital technology seems to promise a new, unsuspected, shining path.

* The state of emergency was declared on March 8, 1963, and still remains in effect. Emergency law empowers the prime minister of the republic, acting as the martial law governor, and the minister of interior, as deputy martial law governor, to arrest preventively anyone suspected of endangering public security and order; and to authorize investigation of persons and places at all times, and to delegate any person to perform these tasks. These broad powers have been exercised by various branches of the security apparatus, which for decades have arrested, detained, and interrogated under torture thousands in Syria without any form of judicial oversight.

* His case is exceptional in that he did was self-financed.

* Oussama Mohammad testifies that amongst the many influences imprinted by his tenure at the VGIK, was that Soviet filmmakers in that time produced a cinema where they voiced a critique of authority, the regime and the official discourse.

* He renames himself Adib when he, his mother and brother arrive to Damascus. Syria was ruled then by Adib al-Shishakli, who seized power after a coup d'état. As the bus drives into Damascus and its neighborhoods, the streets are adorned with banners pledging support to his rule.

* With the notable exception of Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid.

* When *Stars in Broad Daylight* was undergoing the process of "examination", an over-zealous informant deemed it necessary to alert the president's office to the danger the film represented. Arrangements were made for a private screening of the film at the presidential palace and a verdict was never officially issued to either allow for a public release or censor it. Official authorities interpreted the silence as an officious banning and no one wanted to shoulder the responsibility of organizing a public screening.