



## Syrian Cultural Priorities

Conversations About Contemporary  
Cultural Practices

Syria as a Model (2017-2020)

Prepared and presented by  
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**Rasha Salti**

Researcher, and film curator



## Rasha Salti

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*Conversations About Contemporary Cultural Practices: Syria as a Model* is a series of interviews conducted between 2017 and 2020, as part of the *Syrian Cultural Priorities programme*, prepared and rolled out by Ettijahat – Independent Culture. I had the chance to interview curator and researcher in the field of cinéma d'auteur Rasha Salti from Paris via Skype.

**Jumana:** You organized retrospectives of Syrian cinema in the United States, Canada and other regions across the world. You also edited the book *“Insights into Syrian Cinema: Essays and Conversations with Filmmakers.”* How did you become interested in Syrian cinema and why?

**Rasha:** My interest in Syrian cinema was sparked by people who simply mean a lot to me, who have taught me so much and who were like mentors to me, particularly Omar Amiralay, may he rest in peace. When I lived in New York and worked in the field of Arab cinema, I wanted to produce a retrospective of Omar Amiralay. I traveled to Damascus to meet him and asked him about his opinion on the project. In fact, I wanted to produce a retrospective of Omar Amiralay and Oussama Mohammed – whose film *“The Box of Life”* was being screened at the time. Omar said that there was no point in holding a retrospective of his works alone, and that retrospectives of Syrian cinema as a whole would be more meaningful.

Omar spoke to Oussama Mohammed and asked him to help me, seeing as he is a member of the Institute of Cinema. Oussama welcomed me warmly, spoke with the Institute’s director and asked him to provide us with video tapes containing a variety of films. He also gave me a good idea about the history of Syrian cinema. I initially chose a collection of films, and we began to contemplate the idea of the programme. Upon my return to New York, I spoke with Richard Peña, who was familiar with Mohammad Malas and Oussama Mohammed’s

films. Richard was the director of the Lincoln Center and the New York Film Festival, at the time, and a cinema professor at Columbia University in New York. He was knowledgeable about Arab cinema and close to Edward Said. Richard was considered as one of the few people who are open to global cinema in New York and the United States, as he was not only familiar with classical French and Italian cinema, but also knew Cuban cinema. He was also quite interested in Arab cinema. During Richard’s time as director, the Lincoln Center held the New York Film Festival and several other small festivals.

The approach used to manage the programmes was traditional. For instance, a Serbian or Italian cinema week would be held. The idea was to present cinema in a national framework, whereby various national films would be screened without issues, as opposed to other regions, especially during the 1990s and 2000s. I suggested the idea of a Syrian retrospective cinema to Richard and he liked it, so we started exchanging ideas and films. Richard had total confidence in me, given that most of the films I received from the Institute of Cinema were not translated. We started to develop the programme and gather funding. After Rafiq Hariri’s assassination, things changed, and our task became much more difficult. Still, we decided to pursue our project.

**Jumana:** What are the first things that come to your mind when asked about the qualities of Syrian cinema, especially before 2011?

**Rasha:** Due to the fact that there are no film schools, institutes or academies in Damascus, or in Syria in general, I did not know if Syrian films had anything in common. During the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, Syrian filmmakers who had studied in the Soviet Union, particularly in Moscow, worked at one of the most prestigious film schools in the world. Those filmmakers were succeeded by a generation of people who did not study in the Soviet Union, but rather in France, Italy and the United States. Their studies coincided with the emergence of

modern technology. As a result, their use and handling of the camera was different.

The generation that studied in the Soviet Union created films that were nothing short of a miracle. They consisted of elements of “subversion” and freedom. Meanwhile, some films were banned, such as Stars in Broad Daylight, and films that were approved, such as Abdellatif Abdelhamid’s films, particularly his first films which were filled with satire and criticism. The generation that followed included Meyar Roumi, who researched Syrian cinema in his Diploma film and tried to establish communication. It is worth noting that Roumi’s films are considered critical. With the start of the Syrian revolution, I was asked to develop sidebar programmes for revolution-related films during the various film festivals, but I refused because good cinema requires more time.

The revolution coincided with a technological evolution. Thus, film equipment became very easy to use, and Syrian cinema produced – for the first time ever – a heritage consisting of photos about war, killings, success, protests, liberation, and oppression, etc., i.e. about the circumstances that reflect the revolution’s transformation into a civil war. The revolution set a record and generated its own audio-visual representations, the majority of which were shot by people from inside the revolution and not from reporters standing on the sidelines. These filmmakers wanted to show what they were experiencing, doing and witnessing.

At first, the revolution produced several audio-visual materials. I could not choose the films I wanted and paste them together, and neither could I decide if the products I had were considered good films for cinema or not. Therefore, I started giving visual and audio-visual lectures. But people listened differently, and I did not sense that the festival curators considered their duties fulfilled with respect to the Syrian revolution. When you speak and give a lecture, it is

necessary to talk about the pre-revolution period and the current situation. When I was talking about the pre-revolution period, which I really loved, the revolution was portrayed in the most surprising ways and from unexpected places. I remember that during Omar’s funeral, which coincided with the revolution that had just erupted in Yemen, the revolution that was ongoing in Egypt and the revolution that had ended in Tunisia, several people said: a revolution cannot happen in Syria. The revolution emerged from a mysterious – or questionable – place but the arts in Syria were moving in a different course. In 2002, when “the Box of Life” was screened for the first time in Damascus, Oussama Mohammed said: this film is aligned with the opposition.

**Jumana:** How does the world keep track of what is going on in Syria through the arts and cinema in particular? Are there any specific narratives that art and cinema focus on? Are they really new?

**Rasha:** Most Syrians complain that the world does not focus enough on what is happening in their country. However, the problem is that people see what is happening, but they do nothing about it. While there is minimal empathy in relation to Syria, Yemen is completely disregarded. There have been a few activities in support of Syria in Europe, whereas no activities at all have been carried out in support of Yemen. I could not make sense of any of this. The RT channel showed a series of American documentaries by Ken Burns, who is well-known in the U.S., in the form of a documentary series and a long research paper on complex and non-complex topics. For example, he produced a film on the history of New York City and a documentary series on the Vietnam War.

For Americans, the number of Vietnamese characters in the film was equal to the number of American characters. It was the first film of its kind to be screened since the end of the war, which made it exceptional, compared to other American films. The film consisted of

12 episodes, nine of which were bought and aired by RT channel. I have reservations about the political approach and the way American issues were discussed, in addition to how black and indigenous people were portrayed. Despite these reservations, many things caught my attention in these nine episodes. Ken Burns argued that the photos that were broadcast during the Vietnamese War in 1966, 1968, 1970 and 1971 changed the course of war and the public's view on it, which shows the importance of photojournalism.

I believe photos have the ability to change the course of a war. This is what we were expecting to happen in Syria; to find the photo that would change the world. We held on to hope, and we thought that it would happen when people were exposed to chemical weapons. However, no single photo was shared. Instead, Facebook was flooded with hundreds of photos in minutes. I think this is Syria's problem. Too often, in an attempt to protect their identities, people share photos without a signature, person or narrator. The publisher and photographer remain anonymous. And if the photo reflects a certain point of view, the anonymity will disrupt the whole process. In the era where photos are easily and secretly shot and shared in a virtual, automatic and undetectable manner, we cannot believe what we see in every photo. Altering photos is quite easy, and thus they are no longer considered to be a true representation of reality, especially when we have no idea who the narrator is. We cannot be sure that the photo has not been manipulated or changed. The interesting thing during the war in Syria is that, for the first time in the history of the International Court of Justice, photos were not considered as reliable evidence.

The only items that could be considered as reliable nowadays in the International Court of Justice are written, signed and sealed original documents. Thus, photos, which used to be considered superior and indisputable evidence, are no longer that. This is what Syria is struggling with today. When we ask ourselves what the role of cinema

is, the first thing that comes to mind is: the author, his vision and his name. The signature and identity of the artist reflect his vision, his rhythm and his story.

**Jumana:** To be honest, what you said made me think whether there exists a form of continuity or disconnection between the Syrian film heritage and the works produced in recent years?

**Rasha:** Perhaps that was a psychological need. Maybe it was the distance artists placed between themselves and their ancestors in order to find their own paths. Let us take Lebanon as an example: The Lebanese cinéma d'auteur began during the Civil War in 1976, by Maroun Baghdadi and Jocelyne Saab. The committed cinema of Christian Ghazi, Randa Chahal and Borhan Alawieh, may he rest in peace, also emerged. These filmmakers worked during the war. After the war ended, post-war artists, such as Akram Zaatari, Mohamed Soueid and others, considered their works to be different from the works produced during the war. Their work did not complement the messages and beauty of works produced during the war. There was no handover process; the experience of the people who worked during the war was different from theirs, and the world from which Baghdadi, Chahal and Saab emerged had disappeared.

Everything changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first Gulf War. Maps, language, ideology and alliances changed. Everything changed. Therefore, this division could be legitimate. Today, when you look at Maroun's works, especially his films produced in the 1970s, such as "Beirut, Oh Beirut" or "Little Wars", you cannot but think of what the 1990s and 2000s generation offered with regard to the subject of martyrs and how they are portrayed. There is a big difference. Maroun Baghdadi's works were ten times more powerful in dealing with this issue compared to Rabih Mroue. When Maroun Baghdadi needed the photo of a dead person, he added his own

photo. When it comes to Rabih Mroue, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige, Akram Zaatari, Jalal Taoufik and all the artists who worked on the martyr's image in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, I can say that even if Maroun Baghdadi dies, or even if they hadn't seen his films, the idea and method were clearly passed on. I think this is what will happen in Syria after the war or after the revolution ends: we will move to the second phase, where we will watch and observe.

**Jumana:** Is the reason behind this disconnection the lack of a deep knowledge of the history and products of Syrian cinema? Is this lack of knowledge caused by the absence of an archive? In fact, many of the people I spoke with have talked about the absence of an archive, an artistic archive to be exact.

**Rasha:** We live in dictatorships, and dictatorships hate archives. Instead, they try to archive their own information and build their own archives. They even fight every person or institution working to create an independent archive. In completely fragmented communities that do not have a government, such as Lebanon and Palestine, you can find obsessive "archiving". Every Palestinian home is an archive. In Egypt, which is considered one of the largest and oldest Arab states, we find many forms of archives; the National Library and Archives contains papers that are thrown all over the place or stored in bags underground, some from Muhammad Ali's days. On the other hand, universities like Harvard pay millions to keep these archives. In general, dictatorships are afraid of archives, but things have changed significantly. The "photo revolution" occurred. Digital cameras facilitated the publication process and allowed the democratization of the picture and of cinema. The democratization of archives has become essential here. Any person can create an archive for themselves and their family.

**Jumana:** In your meeting with Omar Amiralay in 2008, he talked about the importance of taking one's time to fulfil the key elements of the cinéma d'auteur style of cinema, which are research and preparation. Today, in a time of war, displacement and rapidly changing circumstances, does this not seem impossible? How can cinéma d'auteur be produced in these circumstances?

**Rasha:** How do we create cinéma d'auteur? The film "Silvered Water" provides us with an answer: a self-portrait of the truth and of living by Oussama and Wiam. We can create cinéma d'auteur, but it takes time. In fact, time should pass after a present moment before it can be used by the author to create cinema. I took the political moments we experienced at the time as my subject matter. Films predict events in a poetic, smooth and ambiguous way. Cinema takes its time to present an experience. Maroun Baghdadi's film "Beirut, Oh Beirut", which he directed in 1972, predicted the war. He also filmed Silvered Water, which was created from the centre of the Syrian reality, with one creator in Syria and another from abroad, one creator amidst the siege and the other in the diaspora.

We are lost in the massive number of stories and images that flood Facebook and YouTube. This new tool has allowed people to use it easily and to discover themselves. Sarah Ishaq's film "The Mulberry House" about Yemen is a narrative documentary that falls under the cinéma d'auteur category, alongside "The Return to Homs" film. In fact, many good films were directed in Syria. We cannot count or mention them all, but Mohammad Ali Atassi's films are a prime example.

**Jumana:** What is the process for airing Arab Author films today; i.e. Arab and Syrian non-commercial cinema, and who is the audience for these films?

**Rasha:** The ways in which films move and travel have changed. The good thing about this is that international festivals have understood that Arab cinema exists, including Syrian cinema, and that there is a high possibility that Syrian films would be of high quality. All video-sharing platforms, such as YouTube or Vimeo, offer a simple and effective way to share films, including Arab films. Non-commercial films and cinéma d'auteur films are also shown on Arab channels such as ART, despite the fact that they are shown at night, like Anne-Marie Jasser's films that are shown at 12 A.M or 1 A.M. As such, films are no longer secret. There are different ways and alternatives nowadays to build an audience and return to movie theatres. Many studies have shown that despite the presence of several digital video-sharing platforms, cinema is still thriving, due to its privacy. Screening films on the Internet does not contradict screening films in movie theatres. People realize that these are completely different things.

**Jumana:** You have also worked on the role of Syrian filmmakers in supporting the Palestinian cause. Do Arab filmmakers play a similar role in supporting the Syrian cause?

**Rasha:** In my opinion, it is just a matter of time. There are several Arab directors who are working or aspiring to produce documentary films that show what Syrian refugees are going through. The Syrian crisis began in 2011, and the Syrian regime shut down all foreign media outlets. It even prevented Lebanese people who supported Syrian rebels from entering into the country. Today, it has become easier for Lebanese and Syrian people residing in Lebanon to visit Damascus, and their visits have become more frequent. This could be true for several other regions in Syria, as Lebanese people who visit Syria need a Syrian party to help sneak them in, accommodate them and reassure them, in order to produce films about Syria.

The issue of Syrian refugees remains the most portrayed issue, and not only by Lebanese artists. In Egypt, there is a film that deals with Syrian refugees in the country. However, there remains some confusion in this regard. The Syrian war is a reflection of something else, just as the Palestinian cause was a reflection or metaphor of something else. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Palestine Liberation Organization stirred a fundamental struggle emerged which was formative of Arab awareness. The Syrian cause is different. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Palestinian revolution began and we could either join the Palestine Liberation Organization or the Palestinians in their revolution. Today, as a Lebanese, I cannot become Syrian. We have the Syrian cause, and we see violations of human rights and justice, which are things that the Palestinians at a later stage. Palestinians today talk about a settlement that they did not talk about in the 1970s. When a settlement exists, no films can be produced. No one dreams of a settlement. People dream of a revolution and of victory.

**Jumana:** What are the major priorities that we should focus on in the next stage?

**Rasha:** What caught my attention in the Syrian war is a question I often ask myself. During the Lebanese war, my family and I stayed in Lebanon. My family chose to stay. We had a sense of resilience. People who left were not traitors. You had the right to leave. But we stayed and we held on to our country, despite not having a political party to protect us or to represent us. We were resilient. At the end of the war, those who left treated us as though we were damaged because of the war, as though we were contaminated by the legacy of war, and as though we were the ones who created the war. They returned fully recovered. They witnessed democracy and were well prepared to enter into the twentieth century, while we remained outside. During the Syrian war, people who remained in the country felt guilty,

as though they accepted the regime's tyranny. In reality, those who stayed were afraid of becoming refugees or simply could not leave. Some needed to take care of people with special needs. Most of those who chose to stay did not support the regime, but chose to stay due to their circumstances. During the next stage, a link must be created between the inside and outside, but under which circumstances and under what conditions? The link should be spontaneous, honest and acceptable.

**Jumana:** In conclusion, if Omar Amiralay was here today, how would the films that he produced in the last ten years look like?

**Rasha:** I don't know. Omar was an unpredictable person. He was very creative and unpredictable. He was not afraid of taking risks. When he produced his film about former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, he did not hide his empathy towards him. He was very honest. I don't know what he may have done or where he would have chosen to live or if he was personally in danger, but I know that Oussama Mohammad was very close to him, and I think he produced the film after a weird conversation he had with Omar.

**Jumana:** Thank you, Rasha Salti, for sharing these important thoughts on Arab and Syrian cinéma d'auteur and its role in times of war and in writing history.

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