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Rethinking Images of Violence: Abounaddara and the Right to Dignity

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Abstract

Abounaddara is a Syrian film collective working to circumvent dominant power structures that control representations of Syrians. The manifestos of the collective call for a rethinking of contemporary attitudes surrounding images of violence and furthermore demand a universal right to dignified representation. In this thesis, I explore the main philosophies in the collective's papers and analyze how they interact with an ongoing academic discussion about images of violence, representation, and spectatorship. I then study the Abounaddara's films as a vehicle of expression for the group's philosophies. Selecting nine of the group's works, I identify recurring themes, motifs, and formats within them while considering how these strategies reflect the goals of the collective. In particular, I discuss the manifestations of rituals, the everyday, and war as a peripheral or single part of the Syrian experience. Abounaddara provides an alternate conception of this experience that escapes the constant focus on images that represent solely through the lens of violence and victimization. This thesis aims to underline the collective's active engagement in the struggle for dignified representation while encouraging a critical reconceptualization of images of suffering and violence within the modern world.

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Table of Contents

Chapter I: Introducing the Collective…………………………………………………………......1

The Syrian Context……………………………………………………………………………..2

The Ideology of the Collective…………………………………………………………………9

Chapter II: A Theoretical Discussion of the Image and Violence………………………………13

Chapter III: Snapshots of Dignity……………………………………………………………..21

Dialogue through Film………………………………………………………………………...22

Reconfiguring Representation through Routine and Ritual…………………………………...34

Opportunism and the Monetization of Suffering……………………………………………...43

Chapter IV: The Continuing Struggle for Dignified Representation…………………………….54

Bibliography…………………………………………………………………………………..57

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Chapter I: Introducing the Collective

In March 2011, thousands of Syrians took to the streets as a part of the larger Arab Spring protest movement occurring across the Middle East and North Africa. These protests, although initially peaceful, gradually militarized in the face of a state that would not hesitate to kill, imprison, or torture its citizenry. Over the past seven years, the world has since watched as images of massive explosions, flattened homes, and lifeless bodies flicker across television and computer screens. Nameless victims of regime violence, coalition airstrikes, or rebel firefights are shamelessly broadcasted on new channels who seem more concerned with constructing a spectacle of violence for viewers than genuinely representing Syrians and their experiences. The Abounaddara film collective, an anonymous group of Syrian filmmakers, has since emerged as an opposing force in the struggle for dignified representation. Abounaddara seeks to use their films as a means to engage with normalized representations of Syrians as victims. In a world that is dominated by corporate media and regime propaganda interested in portraying Syrians as refugees, jihadis, or militants, Abounaddara works to reintroduce agency and dignity into representations of Syrians. In this thesis, I consider their films within the framework of an ongoing academic discussion regarding the circulation and viewing of images of violence and suffering. I analyze a portion of the collective's hundreds of films, the majority of which the group released from 2014 until 2017, and identify three overarching categories that characterize recurring trends in style, content, and format. I then closely analyze nine films, considering how each reflects the collective's creed while interacting with established ideas of image theorists. In doing this, I seek to determine in what ways this project presents meaningful, alternative representations of Syria as well as how it demands a broader discussion regarding concepts of agency, representation, and viewing images of violence.

The Syrian Context

Abounaddara began in April 2011 following Syrian protest movements against government corruption and human rights abuses.[1] Over the past seven years, the life of the collective has been linked to that of the Syrian uprising as they both emerged as resistance against censorship and submission to the regime. However, this eruption of vocality is not a coincidental phenomenon, but rather stems from a lengthy background of repressive government policies aimed at denying individual freedoms. This history dates back over half a century to the conception of the regime at the hands of Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, in 1970. He was an unrelenting dictator upholding his regime through policies that censored civil society and required citizens to constantly display outward loyalty to both their leader and his administration.

Following its independence from colonial French rule in 1945, Syria witnessed several decades of political upheaval as administration after administration was toppled by various militant coups. However in 1970, after 25 years of instability Hafez al-Assad, defense minister at the time, staged a military coup, centralized power, purged his opposition from office, and assumed the role of the ultimate leader of the Syrian state.[2] Throughout his reign, Hafez would use the potential for Israeli invasion as a pretext to justify aggressive suppression of civil liberties as well as the mass imprisonment of opposition parties. The massive amount of civilian espionage and surveillance created an environment in which any and everyone was at risk of questioning or interrogation, as the state liberally exercised these powers. Perhaps, most notorious was the State of Emergency law that was established in 1963, and which Hafez

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[1] Abounaddara, "abou naddara." vimeo.com/user6924378/about

[2] Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Sham. *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 11-12.

frequently cited in order to justify his aggressive restrictions of individual freedoms. The law enabled mass censorship of media and other civil liberties under the pretense that the constant threat of Israeli invasion and terrorist organizations warranted the suspension of certain constitutional protections.[3] Specifically, it gave, "sweeping powers to the Martial Law Governor (i.e. the Prime Minister) and his Deputy (the Minister of the Interior) to restrict freedom of assembly and movement; to censor mail, other communications, broadcasts, and publications; to confiscate, suspend and close organs of the media; and to requisition or confiscate property." In addition, it also included, "a long list of offenses "against State Security" and those which "Constitute a General Danger." (Article 6)[4] This extensive civilian surveillance apparatus ensured outward loyalty to both party and president while restricting production of Syrian art, film, and music to that which adhered to rigid regime standards.

Domination of the image of Syria and Syrians was also a primary means through which the regime managed to maintain power during Hafez al-Assad's life. During his rule, Hafez harnessed the symbolic power of the image, using it to redefine public interactions in Syria. Images of him were thus displayed in all parts of Syrian society. Portraits of him were hung in taxicabs, restaurants, shops, and all other manner of public spaces. These images enabled him to create a self-sustaining system of compliance that sustained hollow gestures of loyalty to his rule in spite of the personal opinions of the citizenry. Although Syrians were not required by law to display these images, choosing not to meant that they would miss the advantages of participating in this system. For instance, "Some store owners have to violate import laws in order to survive economically, so they hang a poster of Assad as a talisman to ward off harm, or in less magical

[3]James Paul, *Human Rights in Syria: A Middle East Watch Report* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 1990), 24-28.
[4] Ibid, 26.

terms, in the hopes that an outward sign of loyalty will discourage regime agents from disturbing business."[5] Images of Assad had thus become a form of currency in a self-sustaining economy of outward loyalty, in which citizens aided Assad in projecting his own image. Lisa Wedeen argues that "[p]eople post signs not because they love him (Hafez), but because the system is self-enforcing and people are accustomed to it. People have internalized the control."[6]

In addition to this self-sustaining economy of loyalty, the regime also forced citizens to participate in massive public displays of affection and celebration of the supreme leader.[7] Parades, rallies, and speeches were commonplace with Syrians being strongly compelled to attend. These public spectacles enabled the state to further control imagery circulated in the public sphere and created ritual spaces in which citizens were forced to physically exercise expressions of state loyalty. The grandiose visions of control and glory generated by these massive demonstrations sought to present Hafez as the omnipotent patriarch of Syria who commanded absolute loyalty from all of his citizens.

However, the implementation of a social system which demanded outward displays of loyalty to the regime could only be so effective. Instead of creating citizens who genuinely supported Hafez and his regime, it synthesized a social system in which Syrians behaved "as if" they promoted it. Wedeen identifies this dynamic as the politics of "as if", in which "people together enforce mutual compliance with norms in which they do not in fact believe."[8] Therefore the regime does not have to rely solely on the threat of state punishment to maintain the status quo as "people also regulate themselves and each other to uphold the "norms" the regime

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[5] Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 75.
[6] Ibid, 76.
[7] Ibid, 22.
[8] Ibid, 77.

prescribes."[9] This dynamic thus acts as a self-enforcing mechanism that maintains the domination of the regime over its citizenry while making everyone complicit in its continuation. However, this system of control also invites mini-acts of rebellion and subversion. Many Syrians exploit the superficiality of this system by using small jokes and jests to undermine it.[10] Since the entire structure of this control mechanism is reliant upon ostensible gestures of loyalty, any prods and their reactions against this system subvert it. Wedeen claims that in Syria's context, no one is deceived by the charade of the regime's power, but everyone is forced to participate in it. Therefore, by mocking or criticizing the dynamics of the regime's control, Syrians are effectively subverting it and engaging in political resistance to these norms. Although during Hafez al-Assad's thirty year reign as supreme leader of Syria he employed these politics of "as if" as a means to preserve is regime, it could not win the regime the genuine faith of its citizenry.

On June 10, 2000 Syrian President Hafez al-Assad died, leaving the surveillance state he had spent his entire life constructing to his son Bashar. Hafez's reign was largely characterized by minimal economic growth, slight liberalization and the expansion of crony capitalism. Consequently, at the time of succession many looked to the transition of power as an opportunity to achieve positive change. Western media in particular adored Bashar. He had studied ophthalmology in London for four years until his brother's death and garnered international attention for being perceived as progressive and democratic. His wife, Asma al-Assad, was born in London to Syrian parents and held all the characteristics of the "modern" Muslim woman. She didn't wear a hijab and was also attending school at King's College London when she met Bashar.[11] News outlets fawned over the couple, claiming that they would be champions of

[9] Ibid, 77.
[10] Ibid, For specific example see Lisa Wedeen's Story of M, 67-86.
[11] Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Sham. *Burning Country : Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 16.

reformation and "modern" values who would lead Syria into the 21st century. However, the period following Bashar's succession was not characterized by rapid reform; it was instead a continuation of the same repressive policies.[12] At the time, there was a popular perception that Bashar was being hamstrung by the old elites of his father's administration, but this later proved to be far from the truth.

Immediately following Bashar's ascension to the presidency, groups of intellectuals and like-minded activists began organizing and calling for "legal, political, and economic reform."[13] The demands of reformists were first formally outlined in two letters, the Statement of 99 and the Statement of 1,000, in which prominent members of Syrian intelligentsia called for the repealing of the 1963 State of Emergency law as well as establishment of a multiparty democracy.[14] Though these reforms did not call for regime change or question Bashar's presidency they did demand significant changes in the administration. The regime responded by releasing hundreds of political prisoners and closing the infamous Mezze prison in November of 2000, but this was the extent of the concessions.[15] The State of Emergency law remained in place and the following year saw a return to traditional regime tactics of imprisonment and censorship. This period of new activism was coined the "Damascus Spring"[16] and was a deeply frustrating time for many Syrians who had hoped that change of leadership would translate to a fundamental change in direction of the Syrian autocracy. Bashar's overall lack of a response to demands for change signaled to Syrians that he had no intention to meaningfully alter the status quo. For most this

[12] "Freedom in the World: Syria," 2012, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2012/syria
[13] "Syria in Crisis: The Damascus Spring." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 1, 2012, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48516?lang=en
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

was an unconvincing response and one that would ultimately become a force that drove activists to the streets in 2011.

In March 2011, the first protests began breaking out in four major cities across Syria. These demonstrations were a part of a transnational protest movement occurring across the Arab World. From Morocco to Iraq thousands took to the streets in protest of suppression of civil liberties, corruption, and human rights violations. In Syria these protests began in reaction to the detainment of fifteen boys, all under the age of fifteen, for painting anti-regime graffiti on a wall. During their detention by security forces, the boys were abused and tortured for crimes against the state. After village elders inquired about the conditions of the boys, they were told by security forces to, "Forget your children. Go sleep with your wives and make new ones, or send them to me and I'll do it."[17] This sparked demonstrations, "demanding the children's release and resignation of Atef Najib and the city's mayor."[18] Protesters were met with water cannons and sniper fire as people continued to gather in defiance of the security forces' increasingly violent tactics. The Syrian army then intervened and maintained an active siege of the city, blocking any food, water, and medical supplies from entering. These tactics emboldened other protestors across the country to demonstrate their discontent at the government's reaction and people began again demanding for repeal of the old State of Emergency Law as well as increased civil liberties.

In April 2011, Bashar announced he would lift the decades old State of Emergency law, abolish the state security courts, and introduce a new law that would legalize peaceful demonstration, as long as protestors obtained prior federal approval. However, this decision

[17] Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Sham. *Burning Country : Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 38.
[18] Ibid, 38.

offered little meaningful change. Although the State of Emergency law was repealed, "the government continued to arrest reporters under the ambiguous charge of threatening "national security.""[19] The new law permitting lawful protest functioned as another means for the state to restrict free speech as requests to demonstrate were only granted to pro-government demonstrations.[20] Instead of the old State of Emergency law, the regime relied on media censorship laws established earlier in Bashar's reign. For example, "the 2001 Press Law [allowed] for broad state control over all print media and [forbade] reporting on topics that were deemed sensitive by the government, such as issues of national security or national unity."[21] In addition, the law forbids the publication of inaccurate or false information. Violating this statute can result in up to 3 years of imprisonment as well as fines of anywhere from $7,700-15,500.[22] Needless to say, the regime had a liberal definition of what was and was not "a threat to national security," as it frequently justified imprisonment on these premises.

As anti-government demonstrations continued to increase, the government responded with equivalent violence. Protesters were shot in the streets by snipers and security forces beat or detained any who were suspected of openly resenting the regime or their dictator. This escalation resulted in hundreds of civilian lives lost as Assad repeatedly exhibited the actions his government was willing to take in order to maintain order. By June 3, the United Nations estimated, "1,000 people had died in the first three months of the uprising."[23] As the government met initially peaceful protests with unchecked violence, demonstrators began taking up arms. Foreign actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Britain, France, and the United States

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[19] "Freedom in the World: Syria." *Freedom House*, 2012, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2012/syria
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Sham. *Burning Country : Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 49.

provided training and weapons to the militarizing protest movement.[24] Over the coming years the Arab Spring protests of 2011 devolved into a chaotic, fratricidal civil war that has claimed the lives of over 400,000 people.[25] referring to veteran Moroccan diplomat Mokhtar Lamani, Charles Glass states that, "Syria has become what he [Lamani] called "a proxy war" or wars: the United States versus Russia; the Sunni theocracies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar against the Shiite theocrats of Iran; and Turkey versus Arab nationalists over the attempted restoration of Turkey's pre-World War I dominance."[26]Amongst this amalgamation of competing and conflicting interests the initial calls for reform and constructive change have been lost. Several years following the outbreak of civil war in 2012 came the gradual rise of ISIS that engaged in brutal executions and bombings, all while actively combatting regime forces. US allies, namely Qatar and Saudi Arabia, were responsible for this development as the rebel groups they funded eventually coalesced into the militant group.[27] This development complicated the conflict even more as previously anti-regime powers, including the US, France, Britain, and Turkey, were then forced to commence airstrikes on ISIS held territories, which in turn worked to Assad's favor.

The Ideology of the Collective

Throughout the duration of this bloody conflict, Syrians have only been represented in the media through the lens of suffering, victimhood, and militancy. News outlets continue to project images of spectacular destruction that further their war narratives while the regime seeks to maintain domination over all forms of Syrian representation. Abounaddara seeks to disrupt

[24] Charles Glass, *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe* (London; New York: Verso, 2015), 50-51.
[25] "Syria Death Toll: UN Envoy Estimates 400,000 Killed," Aljazeera online, April 23, 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/staffan-de-mistura-400000-killed-syria-civil-war-160423055735629.html
[26] Charles Glass, *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe* (London; New York: Verso, 2015), 54-55.
[27] Ibid, 60-61.

these normative power systems by authentically portraying Syrian life in all its nuance and complexity.

The overall mission of the Abounaddara collective is to work towards establishing a universal right to a dignified image. The group believes that in the modern world of information technologies, images of individuals have been exploited by media which regularly airs the lifeless bodies of Syrians as objects to be viewed.[28] It is therefore necessary that all humans be afforded a right to a dignified image so as to not be exploited by news outlets. Although their films concentrate specifically on a Syrian context, they insist that the right to one's own image should be universal.[29] Abounaddara argues that the relationship between the media and Syrians has become exploitative due to dominant trends in how these news agencies represent Syrians. The collective claims that the problem with this relationship lies in that international media is more concerned with framing images to maximize viewership than it is with presenting victims of catastrophe with dignity. Even the group's names serves as a means to reference their criticisms with the current status quo. In Arabic, "Abounaddara" is formed by two words. "Abou," roughly translates to either "father of" or "respected older man", while "naddara" means spectacles. When combined they translate to mean "the old man with the glasses or spectacles." This name functions as both a reference and critique. Firstly, it means to reference French philosopher Jacque Rancière's discussion regarding the spectacle and spectatorship. Secondly, it nods to a critique the collective levels against circulation of images of violence regarding the "spectacle" they offer to viewers.

[28] Abounaddara. "We Are Dying - Take Care of the Right to the Image" April 29, 2016, www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/1523/we-are-dying-take-care-of-the-right-to-the-image
[29] Ibid.

The group defines the current system of image circulation in Walter Benjamin's terms of "author" and "producer."[30] In this context, Syrian activists are authors who photograph or film their experiences in Syria, then selling them to international news agencies. They do this in order to both inform international audiences as well as to represent themselves and what they consider meaningful or important. The producer, or the international media outlets, then purchases the author's works and broadcasts their content for viewers. However, the collective argues that this partnership is problematic because the producer has the power to control or influence the type of images captured by the author. Following the adage of, "if it bleeds, it leads," the collective claims that international media has a financial incentive to only portray images of spectacular destruction and violence as this generates the highest viewership.[31] The Syrian activist is then forced to seek out the bloodiest, most gruesome images to photograph because that is what the news agencies are interested in purchasing. Because of this exploitative relationship, the voice of the everyday Syrian has been silenced in favor of a singular view of the region that revolves around images of breathtaking violence and destruction.

Consequently, this relationship has led to the process of what the collective defines as the "banalization of evil."[32] This process suggests that by exclusively broadcasting images of suffering, the international media has desensitized others to the graphic violence and pain within those images.[33] The group then comments on how the media allows Bashar al-Assad to depict himself in popular news channels and how Syrian are shown in general. They argue that Bashar is consistently afforded the ability to control his own self-image. Even though he has precipitated

[30] Walter Benjamin. *Understanding Brecht* (London; New York: Verso, 2003), 85-104.
[31] Abounaddara. "We Are Dying - Take Care of the Right to the Image" April 29, 2016, www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/1523/we-are-dying-take-care-of-the-right-to-the-image
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, he is still able to appear on TV wearing a suit and tie, and as a legitimate head of state. In contrast, his victims are denied this right to dignified representation. Instead, they are only shown as either suffering victims or barbaric combatants. The collective argues that this unequal distribution of image rights is an injustice to Syrians and dissociates Assad from the serious crimes he committed. [34]

Through their films, Abounaddara seeks to inspire action while simultaneously dissociating the Syrian community from the countless images of horror and suffering that populate prevailing news outlets. The films serve as artistic pieces that actively work towards constructing a dignified representation of Syrians while providing a complicated, compelling image of Syria and its peoples. They also operate on several different levels, one of which directly engages with an established academic discussion regarding violent images and viewership. Possessing a core understanding of this discussion provides yet another angle from which to consider the films of the collective, especially within the context of their politics. The following chapter discusses both how the theories of the collective participate in this conversation and address the value of viewing their films within the framework of this theoretical discussion. After outlining this theoretical framework, I then consider several of the collective's films in relation to this discourse as well as how they reflect their own philosophy and worldview.

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[34] Abounaddara. "Something Is Rotten" February 3, 2017, http://www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/9499/something-is-rotten

Chapter II: A Theoretical Discussion of the Image and Violence

The documents and articles on Abounaddara's social media pages are the primary evidence of the collective's ideology and the overall goals of the project. The principal issue addressed in these documents is the idea of the dignified image, specifically with respect to representations of the Syrians. In their article, "Dignity Has Never Been Photographed," the group argues that dignity is fundamental to the concept of Universal Human Rights but has not been equally distributed.[35] They assert that international media maintains a monopoly on how Syrians are presented, thereby denying the ordinary Syrian their right to self-representation. Their discourse focuses on the relationship between international news outlets and Syrian activists on the ground, which they believe exists as fundamentally exploitative. Abounaddara employs German philosopher Walter Benjamin's framework of "author" and "producer" in order to characterize this relationship.[36] In this power structure, Syrian activists act as content creators, or "authors" who capture videos or photographs they find meaningful. Then media corporations purchase the material from the "authors" that will generate the most viewership. The collective then argues that news outlets have a financial incentive to only purchase images of spectacular destruction. This power dynamic means that the "producer" has the ability to control what material "authors" film or photograph since the media only wants to portray Syria through the lens of catastrophe.[37]

Positioning this concept within the philosophy of Jacques Rancière provides another perspective of critique for this power dynamic. Ranciére frames his argument through

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[35] Abounaddara, "Dignity Has Never Been Photographed," March 24, 2017, www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/15348/dignity-has-never-been-photographed

[36] Walter Benjamin. *Understanding* Brecht (London; New York: Verso, 2003), 85-104.
Abounaddara, "We Are Dying - Take Care of the Right to the Image," April 29, 2016. www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/1523/we-are-dying-take-care-of-the-right-to-the-image

[37] Ibid.

discussions regarding the relationship between the spectator and the artist. He states that many argue that the image, in the eyes of the unemancipated spectator, is beholden to the trappings of the spectacle because it encourages voyeuristic spectatorship rather than intellectual engagement.[38] Rancière writes that this conception of spectatorship emphasizes a separation between images and reality, claiming that the spectator himself "is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals." [39] However, Rancière argues that understanding spectatorship in this way reinforces an outdated pedagogy, where the schoolmaster teaches to the ignorant pupil.[40] The pupil is left in a position of ignorance which can only be escaped through the schoolmasters teachings. He then applies this metaphor to the relationship between the image and spectator. Rancière suggests that emancipating oneself from this dynamic enables a more constructive understanding of the spectator than is a part of the unemancipated spectator. Abounaddara in many ways explores the blurring between spectator and actor as their project engages with and calls for broader engagement amongst the Syrian community. They even make a direct call for Syrians to seize the means of creating their own representation in order to disrupt the power imbalance of the author-producer relationship. In this context, Syrians would become both the spectators and actors thereby challenging the idea that spectatorship is inherently ignorant.

There are also differences between the collective's and Rancière's perceptions regarding the morals of portraying and viewing images of horror. Although both Rancière and the collective consider current visual norms flawed, Ranciere takes issue with the content of these

[38] Ibid, 5.
[39] Ibid, 2.
[40] Ibid, 8.

images rather than the quantity of them in circulation.[41] Instead, Rancière suggests that the primary problem comes from the treatment of the victims as nameless, anonymous objects to be viewed rather than individuals with their own personal histories.[42] Rancière proposes that "the issue is not whether it is necessary to show the horrors suffered by the victims of some particular violence. It revolves around the construction of the victim as an element in a certain distribution of the visible."[43] Although this particular position does not address the moral consequences of profiteering off violent imagery, it does offer an alternate perspective on viewing images of catastrophe. Rancière also suggests that the problem does not lie in the quantity nor aptness of violent imagery, but rather in how these images of atrocity are exhibited to and perceived by audiences. In order for images of catastrophe to function as constructive forces in producing awareness of catastrophe, the victims must have a central role in their representation.[44] This divergent position offers an interesting understanding of the power of representation which consequently goes against the collective's position. Although questioning dominant, exploitative power structures and considering the ethical implications of profiting off suffering are invaluable points of debate, to deem all imagery of pain intolerable ignores the multifaceted values of such images.

This then begs the question of under what circumstances is it appropriate to represent or view the suffering of others. The collective suggests that suffering, disorder, and violence have come to dominate popular perceptions of Syrians due to the hegemonic positions of both international media and the Assad regime. In addition, they criticize the widespread circulation

[41] Abounaddara, "We Are Dying- Take Care of the Right to the Image," April 29, 2016, www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/1523/we-are-dying-take-care-of-the-right-to-the-image
Abounaddara, "Dignity Has Never Been Photographed," March 24, 2017, www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/15348/dignity-has-never-been-photographed
[42] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London; New York: Verso, 2011), 96-97.
[43] Ibid, 99.
[44] Ibid, 96-97.

of these depictions of catastrophe as they believe that it reduces the victim to an object meant to incite compassion.[45] The collective sees compassion as working against the idea of the dignified image since it has been so extensively referenced in order to justify the exploitation of others pain.[46] However, the group's complete dismissal of the reaction to these images as bland or insignificant seems almost nihilistic. Surely, compassion engenders a more empathetic worldview than those who are blind to the injustice concurrent in the world. For those who have no knowledge of international events, the very news channels who profit off violent death alert others to such tragedies. This then poses a broader question concerning both what it means to be a spectator in a system of circulation that touts a distinct type of image.

Susan Sontag discusses the implications of spectatorship in the modern world, addressing the dangers brought about by mass dissemination of violent imagery. More specifically, she acknowledges the predilection of news media to obtain images of destruction, while considering the desires of the photographed individual within the process of image production.[47] Sontag states that depictions of this moment of extreme violence can be damaging because they "nourish belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backward -that is, poor- parts of the world."[48] In other words, this limited type of coverage reinforces Western colonial attitudes by suggesting an inherent barbarism or danger in the non-Western world. Whether they be from Africa, South Asia, or South America, constant images of violence create distorted associations between region and incivility. This problem is exacerbated by the reliance of many on media outlets as their primary source of international affairs.

[45] Abounaddara, "We Are Dying- Take Care of the Right to the Image," April 29, 2016, www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/1523/we-are-dying-take-care-of-the-right-to-the-image
[46] Abounaddara, "Dignity Has Never Been Photographed," March 24, 2017, www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/15348/dignity-has-never-been-photographed
[47] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004), 71.
[48] Ibid, 71.

However, Sontag then notes that victims of catastrophe or injustice often wish to have their stories told through the media since it enables them to voice their injustice to a broader audience. Sontag references her experiences in war torn Sarajevo to evidence the image's ability to provide a voice to otherwise voiceless peoples. Specifically she recalls that during the conflict, "Sarajevans did want their plight to be recorded in photographs" and that "victims are interested in the representation of their own sufferings."[49] She suggests that photography can be used as a means of validating an existent reality of suffering regardless of whether it characterizes the reality of events or not. Through this, Sontag illustrates the balancing act in the world of imagery, in which images can mislead spectators or misrepresent victims, while also possessing the powerful ability to visualize injustice and oppression.

In contrast, the collective takes a hardline approach when discussing the position of the spectator. From their perspective, the international media's interest in representing Syrians and Syria as victims only creates misinformed spectators who do not have an accurate grasp of the people behind the image.[50] If the collective believes the spectator to be in a position of ignorance, it is not because they believe viewing is inherently misleading, but because the current system of visibility is distorting and inaccurate. This then poses a larger question about whether creating awareness of catastrophe warrants constructing skewed representations of peoples enduring injustice across the globe.

Sharon Sliwinski offers a compelling point of view concerning this question. She argues that both the camera and the spectator were vital in advancing modern ideas of human rights. In her book *Human Rights in Camera,* she makes the claim that the dissemination of images of

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[49] Ibid, 112.
[50] Abounaddara, "Dignity Has Never Been Photographed," March 24, 2017, www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/15348/dignity-has-never-been-photographed

suffering were a catalyzing force that demanded a rethinking of what it meant to be human.[51] She begins by citing the Portuguese earthquake of 1755 and subsequent tsunami that all but obliterated the city of Lisbon, killing anywhere from 10,000-100,000 people. Woodcuts depicting the devastation of the earthquake spread throughout Europe, eventually even reaching colonized North America.[52] Sliwinski claims that, "these testimonies had a startling effect. Not only did the woodcuts of the quake initiate a lively, international debate about the nature of the human subject and its place in the world, but they also brought into consciousness a global empathy with the sufferings of distant strangers."[53] In short, these images did not desensitize spectators to violence, but instead enabled a new genre of empathy. She then claims that by enabling mass circulation of images of violence, photography has held a pivotal role in the development of human rights. Citing the films and photographs capturing horrors of the holocaust, Sliwinski observes that it was the recordings of the Nazi's crimes against humanity that ultimately led to the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[54]

Sliwinski claims that the camera has enabled aesthetics to inform what she terms "judgement." [55] Judgement here simply refers to a particular determination someone comes to regarding whether something is tolerable or intolerable. Although, judging an image of atrocity on its aesthetic qualities at first seems unseemly, Sliwinski only points to it as a means to identify how people come to identify something as an atrocity. She then asserts that, "judgement serves as a galvanizing force, an experimental form of action that can open grounds for recognition of those who have been expelled from the human community."[56] Challenging the idea that images

[51] Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 18-28
[52] Ibid, 18-19.
[53] Ibid, 19.
[54] Ibid, 18-19.
[55] Ibid, 25.
[56] Ibid, 25-26.

of horror stimulate a futile compassion, she proposes that there is significant value in acknowledging and empathizing with the pain of others. Therefore, although all states might not equally observe human rights, people's judgement of images as cruel or inhuman indicate a collective understanding of them, which in itself has value.[57]

Sliwinski does however concede that the act of judgement will deliver no one from oppression.[58] She argues that the frailty in human judgement lies in that it is varied. Not every spectator will come to the same conclusion when regarding the aesthetic qualities of an image of atrocity. Instead, this collective reaction is multifaceted and, instead of offering a uniform understanding of human rights, reveals the deeply complex interior of this concept.[59] Some may understand an image as a blatant violation of human dignity whilst others might not reach the same understanding. Moreover, overarching systems that determine when and what to show, further exacerbate these differences. Someone who watches CNN will have a different perception of the same event that someone who watches Fox News.

Ariella Azoulay offers another conceptualization of images of violence by considering the power of visibility. She suggests that photography has enabled disenfranchised peoples to voice injustices to other populations. Although she positions her argument within the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, her argument provides a valuable, alternative conception of the relationship between images of violence and spectatorship. Azoulay criticizes current conversations surrounding images of catastrophe, claiming that too often these discussions center around the role of the spectator and photographer rather than that of the photographee. She claims that photography has created a space in which populations previously separated by

[57] Ibid, 25.
[58] Ibid, 26.
[59] Ibid, 27.

sovereign powers can interact with one another.[60] As an example, she points to the Israeli and Palestinian populations because although the Israeli government separates them, photography has enabled Palestinians to protest injustices directly to others, bypassing the control of the state.

Yet Azoulay's concept does not consider the implications of systems of circulation. Overarching power structures greatly influence how many people understand the world, especially when these structures dominate which images to show. For instance, as the collective notes, news organizations choose which images they want to show audiences thereby elevating or silencing voices. Though Abounaddara clearly understands the image as a powerful tool for disenfranchised peoples, the group also demands a rethinking of this framework. For them, dismantling of this exploitative relationship should be prioritized as it silences individuals and uses undignified imagery to generate one-sided profits. This indicates that although the collective regards spectating as a productive civil act, one must do it while being conscious of the systems of distribution.

[60] Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: *Zone* Books, 2008) 9-30.

Chapter III: Snapshots of Dignity

Abounaddara's films are the most direct example of how the group proposes to address these challenges. Through various unique perspectives, individual stories, and rhetorical strategies, the collective emphasizes film's function as a tool for constructing reality through a multitude of different portrayals of experience. Additionally, their choice of Vimeo as their primary platform for broadcasting their works signals the collective's interest in circumventing these power structures. The diversity of topics amongst films also raises questions regarding recurrent themes or motifs and their significance to the collective's overarching goals. In this chapter, I closely analyze nine films from three different types of Abounaddara's works and discuss the specific strategies each employs to engage with the collective's philosophy. Specifically, I consider how their films treat the everyday and routine, as well as how they marginalize the presence of war in Syrian life. Furthermore, I discuss how these films set out to rethink how the image should be treated in a contemporary context.

From early 2011 to 2017, the Abounaddara film collective has posted weekly videos every Friday on their Vimeo page. As of now, there are 450-posted videos on the group's Vimeo page. While their number poses a significant challenge for anyone seeking to analyze the collective's work, they can be divided into three broad categories: Interview, Observed Life, and Satire.

The "Interview" films are the most frequent type and normally consist of brief monologues in the format of traditional documentaries. The stories of the interviewees encompass a variety of different topics and come from a diverse array of individuals who sometimes stand in contention with the worldviews of subjects appearing in other videos. Broadly speaking, the "Interview" films engage the viewer with individuals with lived

experience in an environment that is often characterized by international media in a superficial manner.

Secondly, the “Observed Life” films are those that seek to represent the simple reality of life occurring in Syria. These films explore an equally diverse range of topics, but do so through observation rather than conversation. They do this by observing the minutia of daily life in Syria that persists in spite of the conflict. Focusing on the everyday allows Abounaddara to reemphasize the value of the routine and ritual in a time when the mundane is lost in the cacophony of war reporting. Typically, news organizations compile footage of bombs landing, rockets launching or any other military action that can be organized to create a dramatic, minute-long representation of the Syrian conflict for viewers. However, the Abounaddara films avoid such depictions, instead capturing the slow monotonous process of living.

Lastly, “Satire” films draw primarily on dark comedy and irony as a means to point out hypocrisy and injustice. These videos frequently employ references to western politics, pop culture, or current events and relate them to the reality of Syria. These satirical elements explore the inanity of war and how its atrocities are represented abroad. The many forms in which satire is manifested throughout these videos is wide ranging but all contribute to expressing a popular frustration with many of the events that have come to dominate the fate of many Syrians.

Dialogue through Film

The format of the “Interview” videos offers an interesting expression of Abounaddara’s goals. By avoiding the use of montage during these interviews, the videos generate a feeling of genuine authenticity. This makes the viewer feel as though they are witnessing an unfiltered

representation of Syrian reality. Videos like "Rejoice in Raqqa"[61], "Inappropriate CV"[62], and "We Who are Here"[63] capture a sincerity that the coverage of international media has no interest in representing. In this sense, the collective is directly engaging with Azoulay's concept of a "civil contract of photography."[64] They are presenting their films as an alternate means of understanding the reality of Syria, subverting popular media narratives that control Syrian representation. Additionally, the collective uses several film techniques that signal an awareness of Rancière's discourse regarding the separation between film and reality.[65] For instance, "The State of Things" clearly demonstrates this awareness, employing jerky camera motions that force the viewer to realize their separation. Furthermore, because of their brevity these works invite the viewer to engage with those possessing lived experiences in Syria. The majority of the films are anywhere from 1 to 4 minutes long. In such a short amount of time every aspect of the film absorbs the viewer's attention, regardless of how minute something might seem. Every movement of the camera, sound, and choice of words feels deliberate and carries a weight that demands the viewer's complete attention.

"What Justice?"[66] is a prime example of this category as it uses a variety of the aforementioned strategies. The film begins by fading into what appears to be either a café or restaurant. On the left side of the shop a man sits, shifting his gaze between somewhere off screen and the now empty cup of tea or coffee on the table in front of him. Meanwhile the viewer can clearly hear the sound of birds chirping, cars passing by, and others talking. This indicates that the space chosen by the camera operator is a public one, even though the interviewed

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[61] Abounaddara. *Rejoice in* R*aqqa*. online film, (2017), Vimeo.
[62] Abounaddara. *Inappropriate CV.* online film, (2015), Vimeo.
[63] Abounaddara. *We Who Are Here.* online film, (2016), Vimeo.
[64] Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 9-30.
[65] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. (London; New York: Verso, 2011), 2.
[66] Abounaddara. *What Justice?*, online film, (2015), Vimeo.

individual is the only person occupying it. Additionally, in the background there are many vacant benches and seats. Such a layout further emphasizes the public setting of the film and prompts the viewer to consider two possibilities: either the person recording this film arranged for the, presumably occupied, space to be cleared so he could shoot an interview, or the camera operator sought out an empty public location in order to film this video. The viewer also does not know the interviewee, his location, nor the filmmaker. Although frustrating, this ambiguity is impossible to solve and not the collective's responsibility to address. Abounaddara chooses to be anonymous, as are nearly all of their interviewees and filmmakers. The group is not interested in qualifying themselves to international audiences. Instead they insist that there is value in the experiences they are portraying, regardless of who is recalling or representing them

Figure 1: Screenshot from Abounaddara film *What Justice*?.
Abounaddara. *What Justice?*, online film (2015), Vimeo.

The man begins by answering what seems to be a question regarding whether or not someone should be killed. Although it appears as though he is referring to Bashar al-Assad, it is never clearly explained who he is talking about. The man says he must die. Not because of revenge, but because of what he has done to others. He then claims that if there were true justice,

that justice would dictate that the man who tortures another would be tortured to death for punishment. But, he adds, where would you find someone to carry out this justice? The film then concludes with a single, short cut to black and the man departs, saying "You've uncovered the monster inside me, happy now?"[67] The cut is particularly jarring because it is the only one used throughout the entire film. Such a sudden shift in technique forces the viewer to realize the limitations of their position as a spectator. They do not know what was cut from the conversation. There could have been a long monologue that the filmmaker cut to shorten the film. However, according to Rancière, there is no way the viewer can ever possess a complete knowledge of this process because images cannot function as reality.[68] In order to appreciate the film completely, the viewer must be comfortable in their position of controlled ignorance and understand the value of this form of representation.

The filmmaker also uses music as a means of constructing a tone for the video, a strategy not often used in the collective's films. For approximately the first sixty seconds of the film the interviewed man sits in silence, presumably considering a question asked by the interviewer regarding justice. While the interviewee sits in silence, a faint music begins to play, barely audible over the ambient noise of everyday life in the streets. This inclusion is a significant departure from the typical composition of the collective's interview style films as they generally do not include any music. Even though the music is faint, it adds a powerful tension to the silence at the beginning of the film and seems appropriate given the gravity of the subject matter, as well as the man's response. Despite the fact that the viewer has no idea what the man is thinking in the first minute, the subtle music sets a serious tone for the coming dialogue. The man's comments are then delivered with a great deal of sincerity and seriousness, indicating this

[67] Ibid.
[68] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. (London; New York: Verso, 2011), 2-5.

is neither the first time he has considered this, nor something he takes lightly. His monologue begins with the conclusion that, "He has to die." He never clarifies who he is speaking of, but it is a safe assumption that he is referring to Bashar al-Assad. The man states that, "It's not about revenge,"[69] but rather justice. The topic of the man's monologue is undoubtedly one that many Syrians, and humans in general have considered before. If there is such a thing as justice, who could possibly determine and deliver it? These are uncomfortable questions to ask and invite the viewer to themselves consider. Additionally the film poses a larger question regarding what to do with war criminals who have committed thousands of atrocities.

Another example indicative of the "Interview" category is the collective's film "The Old Man and the Sardines."[70] Like "What Justice" this film features a single individual speaking directly to the camera. However, there are several significant differences that set the two apart. Perhaps most noticeably is the decision to use several cuts in order to capture different perspectives of the old man's face. Here the filmmaker is using two cameras in order to capture the old man's face from different angles. Therefore, the filmmakers have clearly had to do a degree of preparation prior to shooting the film. Additionally, while there is ambient background noise, there is no additional music used to construct or accentuate a specific tone. It is also unclear where exactly the interview is taking place as it could be outside the man's home or simply a location chosen by the filmmaker. Therefore, although "The Old Man and the Sardines" fits within the "Interview" category, there is great variation in the goal of the filmmaker and the strategies they use to achieve it.

[69] Abounaddara. *What Justice?*, online film, (2015), Vimeo.
[70] Abounaddara. *The Old Man and The Sardines*. online film, (2017), Vimeo.

Figure 2: Screenshot from Abounaddara film *The Old Man and The Sardines*
Abounaddara. *The Old Man and the Sardines*, online film, (2017) Vimeo.

The choice to incorporate different shots of the interviewed man allows the filmmaker to explore a different method of introducing the viewer to this individual. In "What Justice?" the single long take used through the majority of the film allows the viewer to witness the full range of the man's facial expression and movements during his thoughts. This gives the viewer an intimate understanding of the man's physical behavior when confronted with this uncomfortable question. However, "The Old Man and The Sardines" offers viewers a different means of familiarizing themselves with the old man. By using various different close up shots of the old man's face the filmmaker chooses to emphasize the physical characteristics of the interviewee. The close ups reveal all the wrinkles, veins, and other attributes typical of aging in a way that forces an association between the old man's physical appearance, his words, and his experiences. Throughout the film the old man recalls when Syria was under French rule, declaring "it's never been like this, not even under the French."[71] These shots therefore exist as a

[71] Abounaddra. *The Old Man and The Sardines*. online film, (2017), Vimeo.

type of physical evidence to the old man's experiences that he is telling the viewer about. This man has not only endured French rule and the decades of Hafez al-Assad's regime, but after all that time he still believes that this time is the worst. He attests to this, saying that he suggested to the state employees in charge of distributing aid to the elderly that they would be better off rounding up all the older people and shooting them. The very last cut to the man captures him expressing concern that the filmmaker might attempt to broadcast this recording on TV. Abruptly expressing such a concern acts as a stark departure from what is typically expected from film. Normally viewers are presented with a highly scripted and constructed composition of shots, sounds, and dialogue, shown in order to achieve a specific goal. Although this particular film undoubtedly employs all of these strategies, the final cut deconstructs this composition as the interviewed individual expresses a personal concern. The filmmaker could have decided to exclude this from the final cut, but did not. Instead this decision to leave it demonstrates the filmmaker's awareness of not only the position of himself as a creator but also of the implications for those involved in the creative process. The old man's closing remark is evidence of this, as he expresses concern over his story being aired on television.

In addition, there is no clear determination of where the old man is being interviewed but it could be the entrance to his home. The old man is squatting in front of a door, around which there are many small children's shoes. Towards the very end of the video there is the faint sound of a baby speaking which indicates that this could be outside of the man's home. Choosing to conduct the interview in such a location humanizes the story as the audience is given a glimpse into this man's private life. Does he have grandchildren? Is he currently living with his children? The shoes also create a disturbing visual link to the previous statements of the old man. If times are so bad why bother stopping with the elderly? Why not start killing the children as well? This

gruesome visual connection reminds the viewer of the man's position within the conflict, while commenting on the gravity of his position.

The film "Without Man"[72] expands on this idea by further exploring the use of the private space of the home. Although I have chosen to categorize this film as an "Interview" video, it incorporates elements also used in the "Observed Life" category. The opening shot of the film captures children playing together in an open space in a home and then cuts to two women preparing a meal. During this time the film focuses less on dialogue or events and more on everyday experiences of family life. This opening portion immediately establishes the location of the interview as private and introduces elements of this woman's everyday life. It is also a striking departure from the format of many of the other videos in the "Interview" category. The majority of these films begin with a static camera focused on the subject of the interview who then begins sharing their experience. The filmmaker's choice to expose the viewer to the minutia of life in this household humanizes the woman and her family. In addition, there are several occasions in which the camera focuses in on the dishes the women are preparing in a style similar to what one would find in a home video. The camera is wobbly, unstable, and gradually drifts across the room, following the women as they move about the kitchen. All the while, the children are heard in the background waiting for the coming meal. This style of filming emphasizes the privacy of the space and positions viewers such that they feel a part of the captured environment.

After the film cuts to the title, the interview begins in what appears to be a darker corner of the house with enough lighting to distinguish the silhouette of the interviewee while still disguising her identity. She then discusses the relationship she had with her husband prior to his

[72]Abounaddara. *Without Man*, online film, (2016), Vimeo.

death. She notes that he was negligent, abusive, and frequently absent, showing no interest in raising his children. When the power went out the husband never provided candles and he rarely brought enough food home for a full meal. Fortunately, the neighbors were kind enough to aid her throughout this difficult period and now she is living a happier life with her children. Throughout the interview the only exists in relation to the woman's own story about the loss of her son and abusive partner. This complicates the black and white perception of war within the media. For this woman, the war has both inflicted an immense pain from loss, while also liberating her from a violent spouse. This does not mean to suggest that the conflict is either inherently positive or negative, but rather that its effects are complex and can affect different people in different ways.

The filmmaker also renders the war as a part of Syrian life, rather than something that consumes all other aspects of it. For example, in the opening shot of the film the door behind the children has graffiti of the Syrian National Coalition Flag, and the word "Syria" surrounded by hearts. This imagery implies a particular political stance without any outright discussion of politics or the war. It also forces the reader to question the husband's relationship to the war. Was he an active member of a rebel organization fighting against Assad's forces? Did he simply empathize with that cause? These questions serve to further complicate simplistic perceptions of the conflict, fighting the notion that one side is inherently good or bad. Additionally, the war is tangentially mentioned during the interview with the women as she talks about the hardships she had to endure regarding loss of power and food, which were exacerbated by her husband's frequent absence. Here the filmmaker seems to indicate that although it is important to acknowledge the fact that the war is ingrained within the daily lives of all Syrians, it is not all consuming. In addition, the film underlines the importance of personal details in representation.

For instance if the viewer had only known that the husband were fighting against the regime, one might assume he was good or a positive figure in the house. Without Man" suggests that this woman's life has improved due to the absence of her husband, regardless of how the war is progressing. Media interviews of Syrians frequently only focus on their lives in relation to the ongoing conflict; the collective's film rejects this dynamic. Instead, they reposition this woman, her life, experiences, and goals as the ends of the film rather than a means. Although war and death have become what the larger public associates with the Syrian context, the war is merely a part of a whole that together constitutes Syrian life.

Much like "Without Man," "The State of Things"[73] explores the concept of the war as peripheral to daily life by making visible that which is normally not presented to international viewers. The opening shot of the film captures a mother preparing a meal for a child who is standing just off screen. Throughout the first thirty seconds of the film the camera remains focused on the mother's face, keeping the meal she is cooking just out of sight. During this period the meal she is preparing is kept hidden from the viewer by the camera, though the viewer is clearly able to distinguish that she is cooking due to the banging pots and bubbling water. By temporarily limiting the viewer's gaze to a specific shot of this woman's face, the filmmaker emphasizes the impact of the sounds throughout this thirty second period. The clattering, popping, hissing sounds of this daily task begin bearing a striking resemblance to the discharge of gunfire or rockets, heard in Abounaddara's other films. This auditory connection is further established in the final shot of the film when the woman complains about the missiles and shelling that she frequently endures. Such a connection again emphasizes the peripheral nature of

[73] Abounaddara, *The State of Things*. online film (2016). Vimeo

the war in the lives of Syrians, as the subject of this video is, like in “Without Man”, is this woman and her daily life.

Figure 3: Screenshot from Abounaddara film *The State of Things*
Abounaddara. *The State of Things*, online film, (2016), Vimeo.

Additionally, during the opening shot of the woman’s face, there are several times where her gaze shifts directly toward the camera. In that instant she is looking the viewer square in the eyes. While this is happening, the camera jerks to the left several times. This motion is particularly jarring since the filmmaker makes no effort to smoothly pan the camera. These choices construct a visual irony as a means to remind the viewer of their position as a spectator. It reestablishes the vast distance between the audience of this film and the subject that is being portrayed. In addition, it reminds the viewer that they are not witnessing reality as it is, but rather a constructed composition of sounds, images, and speech that has all been constructed by the filmmaker. This notification echoes an awareness of some of the concerns expressed by Rancière regarding the spectacle.[74] The filmmaker does not solely focus on generating the viewers’ pity.

[74] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London; New York: Verso, 2011), 2-5.

Instead he invites the viewer to engage with the aesthetic choices made in order to develop the film. As Rancière claims, "The image is not a duplicate of a thing. It is a complex set of relations between the visible and the invisible, the visible and speech, the unsaid and said."[75] Here Abounaddara appears to accept and engage with the inherent inability of the image to capture reality. In particular, the shot capturing the soft glow of the fire on the woman's face has an aesthetic beauty that would be hard to replicate without a camera. The film therefore represents the woman in a different light than that of a standard interview. This shot indicates that although the collective can never fully represent the Syrian experience, their films still can generate meaningful representation for those who would otherwise go unrepresented.

As the film continues, the filmmaker proceeds to engage further with the idea of the war as a part of Syrian's lives. The film exhibits this relationship by underlining a difference between the womans words and her action. Although she complains about rockets and stolen humanitarian aid, she is occupied with the life-sustaining work of cooking a meal. This contrast highlights a false perception regarding the centrality of war in Syrian life and suggests that during this difficult time life still exists and continues. The technical choices of the filmmaker also reflect this attitude. For instance, moving from the woman's face, the camera cuts to a different angle that shows the viewer the pot the woman has been using to cook the food, then zooming in on the flame under the pot. By focusing on the fire, the filmmaker presents a visual reference to the conflict to go in tandem with the auditory one. At such a close distance the fire looks like a collapsed building, recently hit by a missile or barrel bomb. Even upon zooming out the viewer is presented with a visual of the reminder of the war. The apartment is dilapidated and the woman must use crutches to navigate the space. Although it is unclear whether these

[75] Ibid, Page 93.

conditions were caused by the war, the following interview portion indicates they are exacerbated by it. During the interview portion the woman chastises the general violence caused by the conflict. The fighter jets for dropping bombs on them endlessly, and other fighters for commandeering humanitarian aid meant for civilians. These visual and auditory allusions acknowledge the presence of the war in daily life, while simultaneously engaging with the story and life of this mother. Though this interview is reminiscent of those one might find in larger news networks, it is devoid of the traditional trappings of these larger outlets. Typically, on large networks one sees big text boxes advertising other headlines that track across the screen.

The many "Interview" films posted by Abounaddara exhibit different aesthetic styles, motifs, and methods which together constitute a diverse collection of unique stories and experiences. When observed as a group, these films are a means of representing those whose stories have been overshadowed by the international media's monopoly on the image of Syria. The collective employs these films as a means of subverting this dominant power structure and acting as a bridge between the Syrian reality and international audiences. This relationship is currently dominated by news outlets controlling what types of images people see of Syria and Abonaddara seeks to disrupt this. The interview structure of these films provides Syrians a right to authentically represent their stories through direct speech to the camera. Together these films present multifaceted representations in order to paint a more holistic image of Syrians than those shown on news outlets.

Reconfiguring Representation through Routine and Ritual

Films in the "Observed Life" category focus on traditionally mundane or routine acts of daily life. These films in particular are reminiscent of Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov's Kino-

Pravda, or “film truth”. Kino-Pravda refers to an experimental newsreel and theory created by the Soviet filmmaker in which he explored the idea of employing the camera to reflect aspects of reality.[76] Vertov argued that the camera functions much like the human eye, and was therefore best suited to render the happenings of daily life.[77] The subject of his films was life itself, which he sought to capture outside of the staging of traditional films. By portraying the small routines and minutia of ordinary life, Vertov hoped to provide a more comprehensive picture of the world. The collective employs this concept throughout many of the films in the “Observed Life” category as it enables them to explore that which has been drowned out by the coverage of war. Things such as preparing tea, plowing a field, or chopping wood are shown in these films in order to highlight a perseverance absent in the media representations of Syria.

The collective’s film “All Things Considered”[78] exemplifies this trend, beginning by showing the simple routine of a man opening up what appears to be his shop. He sets up his workplace in a deliberate and methodical manner, indicating a familiarity with the space. The shack itself appears battered, with small piles of rubble lying on the roof. The banging of the metal door as it creaks open and the sound of the bench dragging across the ground all demand the viewers’ attention as they dominate the soundscape of the alley. General sounds of the city, such as cars and passing pedestrians are present in the background, however the camera’s focus on this man’s routine concentrates the viewers’ attention. It also becomes evident that there are no overt evidences of the war. Aside from the occasional debris pile and beaten look of the shop one would not be able to tell there was a war occurring at all. The filmmaker’s focus on this man’s daily procedure therefore acts as a proposition that the war does not consume the lives of

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[76] Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 176.
[77] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Dziga Vertov: Soviet Director.”www.britannica.com/biography/Dziga-Vertov
[78] Abounaddara, *All Things Considered*. online film, (2017), Vimeo.

Syrians. Instead, he or she implies that life exists outside of the flashy imagery of bombs, missiles, and gunfire. Although the war certainly affects the lives of millions, it is still only a part of the lives of Syrians. The procedural nature of daily life and society continues regardless of any geopolitical upheaval. Even the title of the film, “All Things Considered,” hints at this purpose, suggesting that viewers must consider all aspects of Syrian realities rather than constricting themselves to a singular lens. This alternate lens forces the viewer to understand Syrians beyond generic categorizations of terrorist, victim, or militant. Instead, it demonstrates the persistence of daily life in spite of the challenges that accompany living in a warzone.

Figure 4: Screenshot from Abounaddara film *All Things Considered*
Abounaddara, *All Things Considered*. online film, (2017), Vimeo.

Additionally, like many of the “Interview” videos, the filmmaker uses the audio to remind the viewer of the peripheral presence of the war in Syrian life. After a fade to black at the beginning of the film the viewer first hears the roaring of a torch. Then the opening shot shows the shopkeeper lighting one of the stoves. The fire roars in and out until it eventually fizzles to smoke. This particular scene demonstrates a clear audio-visual allusion of the civil war. The

roaring flame evokes images of Russian or coalition jets flying across the skies, while their missiles hit and burst into plumes of fire and smoke. However, this auditory allusion does not solely draw reference to the conflict. It also embodies the sound of a roaring fire in someone's home, or an oven top about to be used to cook a meal. The most direct reference seems to be about the war because the viewer knows the film is in Syria and they have come to expect that somehow content from there will be associated with the conflict. This ambiguity serves to both deconstruct the viewers' expectations regarding Syria while providing an auditory reference to the many aspects of the Syrian reality.

The film "Happens in Ghouta"[79] further explores this relationship between life and war in Syria. After the title of the film fades out the viewer immediately hears the thumping of drums commence in the background. The camera then fades in and reveals the performance of a mock battle, in which the participants wield sword and shield while wearing historical dress. They are fighting in a circular area surrounded by a large audience attending what appears to be a wedding. While this battle occurs the sound of nearby gunshots abruptly enter the soundscape. Initially it is difficult to pick out the gunshots occurring as they blend in with the rhythm of the drums. These gunshots function as an auditory allusion to both the conflict as well as traditional wedding customs. First, this scene shows that even during celebration, or other events typical of life in Syria, the war persists. However, celebrating this occasion does not stop due to the gunfire. Instead, the majority of the attendees seem unfazed by the close proximity of the gunfire. Secondly, this scene references the practice among traditional weddings from the region of firing guns into the air in celebration. This means to reinforce the degree to which war has become a part of Syrian life while also reminding the viewer that life, customs, and ritual still

[79] Abounaddara, *Happens in Ghouta*. online film, (2016), Vimeo.

persist. The double-allusion thus means to further complicate popular understandings of the war as all consuming. Though the conflict does not keep Syrians from living their lives, it has still become a notable part of it.

Figure 5: Screenshot from Abounaddara film *Happens in Ghouta*
Abounaddara, *Happens in Ghouta*. online film, (2016), Vimeo.

The camera then zooms out as the performers finish their act and begin walking the apparent groom down the road. Suddenly gunfire erupts again, this time coming from the top of a building on the same street. The camera aims at the roof and the viewer sees the flash from the barrel of the gun light up the night sky as the gunmen discharge their weapon. Throughout this entire sequence however, the threat of a nearby firefight never causes the celebration to stop. Instead, all attendees continue the event seemingly unfazed. As the camera moves back towards the crowd the viewer sees several participants pull out cell phones to record the gun firing. This practice comes out of a now long running tradition of the regime responding to popular protests with extreme violence. Demonstrators assemble and call for regime change, gunfire erupts, bystanders then rush to pull out cell phones. That the process itself has become ritualized indicates that even the war itself has become a routine part of life. Just as the stove-repairer goes

through his daily work routine, so does the everyday Syrian on the street stop to film violence on their cellphones.

This concept is reflected in the title of the film as well. Eastern Ghouta refers to the area in which Assad's forces fired rockets containing sarin gas on civilians and opposition forces occupying the area in 2013.[80] The attack was the deadliest use of chemical weapons since the Iran-Iraq war, taking the lives of over 1,000 Syrians. As I write this in February 2018, Ghouta still experiences an extreme degree of violence as it is currently besieged by Assad's forces that are continuously shelling the area. However, the film makes no mention of this history and instead opts to record a community celebration. This suggests that the filmmaker wants to make a distinction between what "happens" in Ghouta, and what "happened" in Ghouta. Although horrible atrocities have been committed there, Syrians continue to live and celebrate lives in spite of catastrophe. The war is ever present in their lives but it does not stop them from living them.

Another experience explored through the "Observed Life" style films is that of the refugee. Both the films "EUROPA 1/2"[81] and "EUROPA 2/2"[82] portray this aspect of Syrians' experiences by grounding the viewer within the chaos of fleeing one country and entering another. Although the titles of the films suggests "EUROPA 2/2" to be a chronological sequel to the first, this is not the case. Instead, the films should be viewed as portraying the same reality, but from different perspectives. "EUROPA 1/2" begins on the shore of what is probably Greece, where a group of aid workers wait to help three boats laden with Syrian refugees as they approach the shoreline. When the boats arrive, chaos ensues. Men, women, and children are getting off the boat while cold water splashes everywhere. The viewer hears many different

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[80] Human Rights Watch, "Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria," September 2013, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria_cw0913_web_1.pdf
[81] Abounaddara, *EUROPA (1/2),* online film, (2016), Vimeo.
[82] Abounaddara, *EUROPA (2/2),* online film, (2016), Vimeo.

languages as refugee and aid worker attempt to communicate in broken English. Once off the boats blankets and coats are given to the refugees while several photographers attempt to photograph a man holding his small child in a blanket. The pictures taken by these photographers could appear in a number of different news articles seeking to generate empathy for the refugee crisis. However, the filmmaker seems to suggest that these photographs do not accurately convey the chaos, miscommunication, and emotional trauma that accompany the act of fleeing. In the film, the viewer experiences the chaos of the moment, whereas the published image tends to portray a simplified depiction.

Figure 6: Screenshot from Abounaddara film *EUROPA (1/2)*
Abounaddara, *EUROPA (1/2),* online film, (2016), Vimeo.

The film acts as an attempt to ground the viewer in the audio-visual environment experienced by fleeing refugees. Throughout the film, there are occasions where refugee and aid worker struggle to communicate. Towards the end of the film a worker attempts to ask a refugee how the war is going, wanting to know who will win in their opinion. Although the other man speaks English he is unable to understand what the worker is asking until the cameraman clarifies the question. Throughout this scene there is shouting and children crying in the background, all while workers rush by, trying to provide blankets to the new arrivals. The

violent, sudden motions of the camera replicate the feeling of confusion, trauma, and disorientation experienced by those who were forced to flee their homes.

The film “EUROPA 2/2” tells a similar story, but from a different perspective. While the opening shot of “EUROPA 1/2” begins on the shoreline, “EUROPA 2/2” begins in a boat where a group of refugees await their imminent arrival. All sit eerily silent as they look towards the approaching land. This alternate perspective forces the viewer to understand the films as partners that render similar events differently. Some aspects differ, such as the events leading up to the arrival on the shore. Instead of viewing the boats approaching the shore, the camera is positioned on the boat itself. However, some aspects are also shared. After the refugee families land, they still must deal with the language barriers at a check-in station.

The camera then cuts to the title and transports the viewer to what appears to be a nearby checkpoint for newly arrived migrants. Much like the first film, the viewer then hears an incoherent mesh of sounds ranging from families talking amongst themselves to announcers shouting through intercoms. This sudden shift from silence to sound jars the viewer, grounding them in the noisy chaotic reality of the process rather than an edited, staged photo shown in the news. The camera then follows one family around the checkpoint as they try on different clothes and meeting up at a bus that eventually departs to an unknown destination. Throughout this entire process there are no subtitles, making it difficult for non-Arabic speaking viewers to understand any of the dialogue between the families. This choice is striking and deliberate. It immediately establishes a distance between international viewers and those refugees in the checkpoint. Viewers must then understand their position as a spectator of this event rather than a witness. The lack of subtitles forces the viewer to reckon with this separation. This immediate distance therefore causes viewers to come to terms with their own limited ability to understand

the reality of the event. This then begs the question of why should people bother viewing these images as they will never truly be capable of understanding the reality they portray. I would suggest that in spite of this separation there is still communication occurring between the photographee and the viewer. The photographee is taking part in the civil contract of photography by willfully allowing themselves to be photographed and their experiences shared.[83] Therefore, although the viewer is inherently separated from the reality of photographed events, the photo still instigates and functions as a meaningful space of communication between these two individuals who would never be able to interact otherwise.

Abounaddara's films in the "Observed Life" category strive to depict aspects that together constitute the experiences of Syrians. In particular, their use of routine and ritual maintain the importance of the daily in times of catastrophe. Although the conflict has affected the lives of millions, these films position the mundane aspects of the everyday as forms of protest against destruction. Their persistence despite dire circumstances serves as a reminder of the durability of life and the human cost of war. Abounaddara's adaptation of Vertov's Kino-Pravda enables them to explore the diversity of meaning found in everyday life. Particularly in times of war, the routine and everyday can be easily lost, however the collective reminds the viewer that these rituals persist and maintain their meaning. By repositioning the routine at the center of Syrian representations, Abounaddara highlights the dignity found in everyday existence. The collective does not attempt to hide the fact that war is indeed a significant and recurring part of the lives of all Syrians. However, they do seek to remind viewers that Syrians exist outside of the context of war and suffering.

[83] Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: *Zone* Books, 2008) 9-30.

Opportunism and the Monetization of Suffering

In the "Satire" style of film the collective frequently criticizes prevailing simplifications of the Syrian conflict and its victims. Abounaddara addresses international perceptions and media organizations in order to take issue with their content or, more broadly, their world view. The film category addresses islamophobia and foreign interests in the conflict as well as how images can be weaponized to generate profit and further political agendas. This category is perhaps the most dynamic of the three as the style and structure can vary significantly from film to film.

While viewing the "Satire" films it is helpful to observe them through the lens of Sharon Sliwinski's concept of judgement.[84] In her book *Human Rights in Camera* Sliwinski claims that the camera has led to the evolution and establishment of universal human rights by enabling humans across the world to come to a consensus around what was intolerable through observing it. Sliwinski argues that the ability to witness catastrophe has informed the human process of "judgement." Observing suffering through the lens of aesthetics has therefore added another means of developing a "judgement" of what humans believe to be inhumane. The collective's "Satire" films, however, seek to show how judgement can be used for regressive agendas. It can be used to aestheticize conflict, rendering something intolerable as sterile. Images and film can be constructed or presented in order to further a goal. Everything can be framed and the "Satire" films serve as an example of the negative potential of this power.

One of the most striking films in this category is entitled "Kill Them!"[85] The film is an assemblage of clips taken from an opening statement on Fox News given by American media

[84] Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 25.
[85] Abounaddara, *Kill Them!,* online film (2015), Vimeo.

personality Jeanine Pirro.[86] Her statement was made in reaction to the Bataclan terrorist attacks [87] in 2015 that were carried out by terrorists aligned with ISIS. On November 13th, three suicide bombers attacked the Stade de France while a separate group struck an Eagles of Death Metal concert at the Bataclan theatre. This coordinated series of attacks took the lives of 130 people, making it the deadliest attack in France since the Second World War. In her proclamation, Pirro stresses the need for the United States government to respond to such violence with violence in turn, lest it happen again. She claims that only Muslims can resolve the threat posed by such terrorist groups and that the duty of the United States is to "arm those Muslims to the teeth," casting a blind eye to any atrocities against civilians in the Muslim world enabled by such armament. She then cites Egyptian dictator Abd al-Fateh al-Sisi as someone all Muslim nations should strive to emulate, due to the success of his 'iron fist' response to terrorist threats. During this segment, Pirro emphasizes how al-Sisi, "a Muslim," has achieved results in a nation that is "85% Muslim." Here Pirro implies that al-Sisi's success has been achieved in spite of his own religious identity. This proposition suggests that Muslims somehow have an innate willingness to tolerate terrorists within their communities. Additionally, she begins conflating what she defines as "radical Muslim terrorists" with the Muslim population of the world at large. While at first she uses this term to refer to the terrorists who carried out the Bataclan attacks, it later becomes unclear as to whom she is referencing. It frequently appears as though her tirade is meant as a broader critique on all Muslims as she fails to distinguish between terrorists and those who are not terrorists. This disturbing, absolutist rhetoric assumes an understanding of the world in the

[86] Jeanine Pirro, "'We Need to Kill Them': Judge Jeanine Says It's Time to Stop Islamic Terror," Fox News online, January 11, 2015, insider.foxnews.com/2015/01/11/we-need-kill-them-judge-jeanine-pirro-says-its-time-stop-threat-radical-islamic-terror

[87] Steve Almasy, Pierre Meilhan, and Jim Bitterman. "Paris Massacre: At Least 128 Killed in Gunfire and Blasts, French Officials Say," CNN online, November 14, 2015, edition.cnn.com/2015/11/13/world/paris-shooting/index.html

terms of Samuel Huntington's, *The Clash of Civilizations*[88], in which Muslims and Christians will ultimately engage in a hegemonic religious war.

"Kill Them!" functions as a reduction of this tirade to its vitriolic essence, highlighting the underlying racist, islamophobic rhetoric throughout Pirro's rant. The filmmaker isolates segments of her speech and reconstructs them into something more akin to a music video or movie trailer than a film. This adaptation means to point out a tendency within American media to incite islamophobia and fear rather than insightful political discussion. In the film, Pirro provides simple, but definite answers to what many in the American public have now come to see as a grave threat to their way of life. Even more concerning is that this type of language has led to associations between anyone who practices Islam and terrorism. Fox News, as well as other news organizations stand to benefit from exaggerating these threats. This film in particular serves as a direct critique of what Abounaddara identifies as the 'author' versus 'producer' relationship.[89] Fox News has a significant financial incentive to present Syria only within the framework of the conflict and through a lens that characterizes Syrians as either refugees, regime soldiers, or "radical Islamic terrorists." Within this power structure, the media only purchases images that fit within their 'war narrative' thereby leaving international audiences with a restricted, incomplete image of Syria and its peoples. This power imbalance between 'author' and 'producer' has thus obstructed Syrians' ability to represent themselves in a way that aligns with their own beliefs, identity, and culture. Though they may record or photograph events that they find meaningful, the media maintains the ultimate power in determining what is worthy of the international spotlight. The film "Kill Them!" suggests that, in Fox's case, the only thing

[88] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York; London; Toronto; Sidney: Simon and Schulster, 2011)
[89] Abounaddara, "Dignity Has Never Been Photographed," March 24, 2017, www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/15348/dignity-has-never-been-photographed

worth representing is that which corroborates their Us versus Them narrative of religious war and genocide. Accordingly, the Abounaddara filmmaker uses their work in order to mock this absolutist position, consequently revealing its shallowness.

This imperious attitude is reflected in the video with up tempo guitar for background music while Pirro's lines flash in blood red on the screen. The fast paced music and aggressive colors demand the viewers' attention, forcing them to focus on the spectacle of the rhetoric rather than its content. It encourages viewers not to meticulously consider what is being said. All one needs to know is that what we need to do is "kill them," which we will do by "arming those Muslims to the teeth" and bombing them again and again. Such a jarring compilation of cuts, clips, and sound bites from the original video makes it obvious that the filmmaker is not trying to accurately represent Pirro or her views. Instead, the film seeks to expose the racism and prejudice underlying her inflammatory rhetoric, while mimicking her treatment of thousands of Syrians who are not allowed to accurately represent themselves.

These bombastic elements of the video function as the primary means through which the filmmaker achieves this aim. The repetition of her line "We need to kill them", the massive text that fills the screen, and the guitar riffs all mock Pirro's stance. According to her, there is no grey area. There are good guys and bad guys, an "us" and "them," both of whom are locked in an existential struggle. The Abounaddara filmmaker calls attention to these words in order to call out a particular othering process at work throughout Pirro's statement as well as the latent chauvinism within her understanding of the world. Throughout her video she espouses a world view in which Muslims are a threat to the national security of the United States. Much like her video, in the film it is difficult to discern who Pirro is identifying as 'Us' and 'Them.' The constant repetition of "We need to kill them" throughout the video only feeds the chaos and

uncertainty. However, the juxtaposition of the lines “Arm those Muslims to the teeth” with “They don’t operate the way we do” functions as an overt identification of Muslims as ‘Them.” Here the filmmaker wishes to make a direct connection between Pirro’s statement and its implications. By claiming that the United States should arm Muslims to the teeth she suggests that Muslims should be treated as thugs to be let loose on one another. Such a distinction implies an intrinsic difference between Muslims and Americans who, in Pirro’s mind, should act as the sophisticated mob boss. By positioning this line next to “They don’t operate the way we do” the filmmaker further illustrates why such language is othering. It purports that Muslims are not only a strategic asset meant to be used, but they are also fundamentally different from Americans, both temperamentally and cognitively.

There is also a visual dimension to Pirro’s words as there are various clips of both her and the conflict appearing in the words. Some of these clips include videos of ISIS fighters, American soldiers, and airstrikes. It is almost impossible to distinguish who or what groups are in these clips as they are pixelated and saturated in red color. Like Pirro’s rhetoric in the film, the viewer is not meant to contemplate the content but rather embrace it as visual stimuli. One has no way of knowing who the soldiers appearing are or who they are attacking, but since they seem to be dressed in something resembling U.S. military uniforms, they must be the good guys. Likewise, there are no details given regarding where the airstrikes are landing, who fired the rockets, or how many civilians were killed. The viewer is simply meant to accept the images in the same way they accept Pirro’s absolutist positions, without question or analysis. Through these bombastic visual elements, the filmmaker attempts to reveal the danger behind Pirro’s rhetoric by showing the danger of taking words and images at face value.

Figure 7: Screenshot from Abounaddara film *Kill Them!*
Abounaddara, *Kill Them!,* online film (2015), Vimeo.

However, the film also draws attention towards a larger issue at hand, that concerning how separated populations engage with one another through the image and specifically media. The collective has identified an unequal endowment of the right to represent oneself through the image between Western and non-Western populations.[90] The latter is typically only portrayed through the lens of conflict, exodus, or destruction, with the bodies of victims laid bare before the eyes of a world audience.[91] The former, however, is afforded this right to prohibit the use of their image as they see fit. For instance, in 1991 at the start of the First Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush enacted a media ban on photographing American coffins returning from the conflict.[92] The administration argued that the policy would preserve the privacy of grieving families. Yet one must ask why this same right has never been afforded to those suffering abroad, whose lifeless bodies are routinely broadcasted across major news networks. This

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[90] Abounaddara, "Dignity Has Never Been Photographed," March 24, 2017, www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/15348/dignity-has-never-been-photographed.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Don Gonyea, "Ban on Media Coverage of Military Coffins Revisited," February 11, 2009, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100597542.

imbalance has distorted how international audiences engage with each other, creating inaccurate portrayals that can easily warp how people view one another. Within this system of international engagement, the media, or producer, acts as the hegemon.[93] They, too, select sound bites and video clips that conform to their overarching story about Syria, its people, and the civil war.

"Kill Them!" mocks this power imbalance by inverting it. The filmmaker possesses the power to disassemble Pirro's words and reconstruct them in a way that aligns with his own agenda. In the film, the audio and video clips exhibit a blatant dissection of Pirro's original points in her statement. This dissection means that the filmmaker supersedes the role of 'producer' while Pirro takes the place of the 'author.' She believes that her opinion and positions are valuable and should be broadcasted to a wider audience. The filmmaker however, is more interested in showing particular parts of her statement that conform to the collective's artistic goals. While the filmmaker does not possess a particular financial incentive to do this, as is the case with popular media, the overall structure of the power dynamic is still reversed. Pirro's image has been commandeered and distorted to conform to an alternate goal. Moreover, it is not difficult to imagine this film being used by terrorist organizations as evidence of American hatred for Muslims. Although these clips do not create an accurate image of American society in general, this portrayal could also be cited as representative of them. Clearly this representation is absurd, yet many Americans look to media organizations like Fox News as if they can provide a genuinely accurate representation of Syrians and their country. "Kill Them!" therefore seeks to highlight a dangerous trend in US media of conflating a religion with murder while it critiques the power structure that propagates this erroneous association.

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[93] Abounaddara, Dignity Has Never Been Photographed, March 24, 2017, www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/15348/dignity-has-never-been-photographed

Building on of these concepts, the collective's film titled "GoBro: The War From Within"[94] extends a more explicit critique of the exact content that the media is interested in airing. Additionally it mocks the commercialization of warfare by highlighting the image of war in the media and popular culture as spectacle.[95] News outlets frequently present war from a singular, black and white, point of view, which consequently denies a voice to those who suffer the consequences of its violence. Their lives and stories are left untold while thousands of soldiers battle for innumerable different causes. "GoBro: The War From Within" mocks this fantasized view of conflict while directly engaging in a critique against the media's profiteering and obsession with obtaining "authentic" footage from the war.

The film is noticeably short, lasting only thirty seconds, and offers a first person perspective of tanks as they fire off rounds. The overall structure of the film is akin to that of a commercial. It is short, action-packed, and focused on selling the product of violence. Time is also sped up so that the viewer isn't bored with the slow pace of a moving tank. Instead, they only witness guns firing rapidly over and over again. Much like "Kill Them!" the fast paced guitar mocks the coverage of the civil war by likening it to an advertisement. The perspective of the footage also highlights this as it comes from the point of view of the gun sight. Viewers are only able to see where the tank is going and where they are firing. In addition, the viewer has no idea who is piloting the vehicle. It could be Assad's forces, the FSA, or ISIS fighters, there is no way of telling. Such a perspective removes even the dynamic of good and bad. Instead, it advertises a pure joy found in firing the tank's gun and destroying buildings. In "GoBro" The War from Within," there are no repercussions for these actions. There is also no footage of the aftermath or of those on the receiving end of the gunfire. Destroyed homes, shops, and bodies are

[94] Abounaddara, *GoBro: The War From Within*. online film, (2015), Vimeo.
[95] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. (New York; London: Verso, 2011), 2.

left absent from the camera as the film quickly cuts from tank to tank while they fire off rounds. Instead, the film shows that one can enjoy the action and adventure removed from its consequences. This provides a sanitized view of conflict that is removed from the human and societal cost of engaging in acts of war.

The name of the film also introduces several interesting dimensions to the singular perspective of the film. Firstly, the brand GoPro advertises its products through extreme sports, recording athletes doing everything from surfing to skydiving. The slogan of the company is "Be a Hero" and the entire appeal of the product comes from its portability, making it possible to record almost anywhere. When watching these advertisements, consumers are meant to feel as though they are athletes. They are seeing exactly what the athlete saw, even though they are totally removed from the action the athletes were doing at the time. Even the slogan promises the viewer that they, too, could do this one day. Within the context of the Abounaddara film, the viewer is meant to experience this same feeling. The viewer has a front row seat to a conflict occurring thousands of miles away, and totally removed from the threat of death. However, this sensation is clearly a false one, and especially so with regards to the film.

Figure 8: Screenshot from Abounaddara film *GoBro: The War From Within*
Abounaddara, *GoBro: The War From Within*. online film, (2015), Vimeo.

Secondly, the name acts as a broader critique of the financial incentives that encourage representing Syria through the lens of conflict. The fact remains that violence sells and the closer footage gets to that violence, the more revenue it will generate. “GoBro: The War From Within” is as close as international spectators can get to the Syrian Civil War. International news organizations have a high incentive to search not only for footage of catastrophe, but footage captures that catastrophe first-hand. In this sense, the media uses destruction as an advertisement for the capitalist power structure of author versus producer. Viewers will tune into their favorite news channels expecting to see spectacular images of destruction. Although there is assuredly value in being alerted to catastrophe across the globe, this narrow coverage has drowned out the voices of Syrians. This profit driven relationship has consequently denied many the right to represent themselves while positioning the spectacle of war as the central narrative of Syria.

In this context, the collective exhibits how aesthetics can misinform and mislead. If the camera has enabled human societies to collectively determine what is inhuman by informing “judgement” with aesthetics, then it has equally enabled the aestheticization of violence The filmmaker’s use of montage underlines how easily war can be aestheticized and made appealing. The filmmaker cuts out all the appalling aspects, like dead bodies or destroyed homes, thereby leaving the viewer with a cleaner version of the violent reality. One can easily remove all the unpleasant aspects of this state and present it as clean and civilized. This sanitized image misinforms viewers and consequently skews their “judgement.” What was once intolerable becomes tolerable. “Go Bro: The War From Within” presents a sterile version of war that is entirely removed from the human cost of its undertaking. If there is to be a right to an image, it

will be predicated on a universal understanding of the power of aesthetics as well as the power of representation.

Chapter IV: The Continuing Struggle for Dignified Representation

Now, seven years following its creation in 2011, Abounaddara's roster of films on their Vimeo page numbers 450.[96] Each one of these films offers a compelling micro-story reflecting a particular perspective of Syrian life. Some document the everyday rituals and routines of people who continue their daily routines during war. Others offer politicized satire that mocks and criticizes modern systems of image dissemination. Regardless of their format, style, or message the power of these films lies in their individuality as well as their collective cohesion. Their differences allow the collective to explore the countless different aspects of the Syrian experience and the systems that affect representations of this experience. When considered as a broader whole they level critiques and questions regarding how society treats the image.

In particular, they reveal the dual function of images as objects of positive and negative change. Images, be they film or photography, possess the power to make visible that which was previously hidden. Following the conclusion of World War II the world witnessed the filming and photography of industrialized genocide that claimed the lives of six million Jews. Decades later, during the Vietnam War, the camera televised the horrors of war from which those at home were previously kept separate. Although visualizations of violence and destruction have not stopped them from occurring, they have provoked a broader conversation about the essence of humanity.

However, Abounaddara reminds the world that images can also be manipulated to further regressive purposes. If aesthetic qualities of photography and film can account for furthering human rights, they should also be held responsible for perpetuating inequality and injustice. Images shape the way people conceive the world around them, meaning that institutions of

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[96] Abounaddara, "abou naddara." https://vimeo.com/user6924378

power can employ them in order to advance particular narratives, either intentionally or unintentionally. Though this can take the form of state propaganda or censorship, it also manifests in subtler forms. The collective specifically underlines how corporate media has employed specific imagery of Syria to maximize their profit while consequently influencing how the world perceives the Syrian experience. Although these corporations might not have purposefully sought to administer representations of Syria, this prevailing system of circulation has nevertheless created an exploitative relationship. These representations have created a limited framework of understanding, skewing perceptions of Syrians to only that of the victim. Amidst this hegemonic structure, the image's power has been coopted to further a narrative of spectacular destruction that does not accurately represent the people. The image, therefore, should not be understood as either intrinsically positive or negative since its effect depends on who wields this power. Abounaddara uses their films as a reminder to its audience that there is no inherent truth in visibility, but that there is still an important power in it. The group has seized this power in order to fight back against this dominating system of imagery, using their project to assert the urgent need for authentic representation as well as a universal right to a dignified image. Without either, society will continuously be beholden to the trappings of spectacle, at the expense of the victims of violence and catastrophe. The compelling stories in each film reminds viewers of the human being behind the images of war and suffering that flood television screens. Through this project, the collective demonstrates the vital importance of representing the other as an end rather than a means and highlights the dehumanizing tendencies the current mode of circulation cultivates.

Yet there are also significant restricting factors that affect the collective's project. One must then consider the impact of avoiding all images broadcasted through international news

outlets as their exposure certainly exceeds the traffic on the collective's Facebook or Vimeo pages. Although Abounaddara's films do offer a more authentic, grounded image of Syria, they are limited to an already educated "citizenry of photography" who purposefully seek out alternate means of understanding the civil war. As of now, their Facebook page has just over 9,200 likes, while their Vimeo page, the major source of their videos, has around 1,100 followers. Although I cannot speak on the popularity of the collective amongst Syrians, many of those engaging with the group's films already empathize with the collective's viewpoints. Though the overall value and meaning of this project is not limited to the popularity of their social media pages, these numbers are worth considering. Especially, since one of the primary goals of the collective is to champion a universal right to dignified representation. In this context, the collective is in dialogue with a foreign audience that is already conscious of systemic problems surrounding how the world treats images of violence. Naturally, the creation of authentic representation is intrinsically meaningful and is not obligated to appeal to any particular outside audience. However, since Abounaddara means to affect how the world understands images of violence, this element is a noteworthy issue. Millions who watch nightly spectacles of destruction on the news largely remain captivated by these dazzling images. Though I do not possess a solution to address this issue, it is worth consideration in the context of the broad changes the collective hopes to achieve.

Even so, Abounaddara occupies an invaluable space in the current struggle to create dignified representation. Though they concede that dignity has never been photographed,[97] the group nevertheless endeavors to reach this ideal. Their films provide snapshots from the daily lives of Syrians that engage with their subject in a way that news corporations have not, and with

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[97] Abounaddara, "Dignity Has Never Been Photographed," March 24, 2017, www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/15348/dignity-has-never-been-photographed

an urgency that demands immediate attention. Furthermore, Abounaddara's message poses a broader question regarding how we view images or footage of violence, catastrophe, or suffering. In a world in which local news hunts for depictions of grotesque murder while larger organizations search for foreign victims of oppression, it becomes easy to forget the humanity behind the image. The collective reminds us of the relationships, rituals, experiences, and identities of these individuals, and demands that they be shown with dignity.

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