

Artisans of cinema: an Abounaddara reader

In this piece commissioned for How to work together's Think Tank, Stefan Tarnowski and Victoria Lupton in conversation with the collective unpick Abounaddara's collaborative production process.

Abounaddara is an anonymous collective of Syrian filmmakers. Since 2011, they have been releasing one short film, which they distribute freely online through Vimeo and Facebook, every Friday, the main day of protest in the Syrian revolution. [hyperlink to sites].

In the months leading up to the Syrian revolution, and then over five years of tumult, Abounaddara has developed a mode of film production that stands in opposition to the neo-liberal policies of both the Assad regime and the art world. It is a mode of production that developed gradually, largely in response to the rapid transformations in Syria, but also to a lesser extent as a form of self-defence against an art world that has wanted in on the action.

The art world's attraction was to be expected. In Syria, a battle was taking place over the image itself. And with new paradigms in media representation being set, Abounaddara was offering a consistently insightful and critical take on a place producing images that were breaking precedents and yet, paradoxically, the same monotonous analysis: it's all too complicated.

In response to the new paradigms in new media, both the art world and the traditional media had something in common: they demanded an over-production of images. That surplus stands in stark contrast to Abounaddara's approach, an approach they have begun to conceive of as an artisanal mode of film production.

Made with little-to-no budget and independent of institutional support, the collective works on a small scale, never generating a surplus of material to meet or make a market demand: one film a week, every week. Producing films using the skills and services of the different members of the collective, within the collective there is a sense of apprenticeship rather than authorship. Each of the weekly films is carefully manufactured to carve out a cinema that is both timely – responding to events on the ground in Syria – and fiercely independent – of the regime, the Islamists, and the various proxy forces fighting on behalf of foreign backers – while standing unwaveringly in solidarity with the popular demand of the Syrian people for dignity.

Abounaddara's artisanal mode of production harks back to a pre-Assad Syria, perhaps imagined and partly Utopian, but certainly a time before Bashar al-Assad's neoliberal reforms that have been breaking down longstanding social structures and concentrating huge wealth in the hands of his small family circle. It has also developed into a proposition, a proposal for a way of working that swims against the tide of the exponentially increasing flood of images, especially those clips of horrific violence that flicker on our computer screens or crank up as we swipe down the news feeds on our smartphones.

Abounaddara often begin or end their public talks with an invitation for the audience to join them in their pursuit of a new politics of the image, a politics that doesn't leave the Internet and news channels awash with the brutalised bodies of Syrians while images of European victims of attacks are declared illegal. In Syria today, marketeers from around the world traffic in the inflation of violence in order to notch up views, their aims ranging from making a bit of quick cash to harnessing the viral aspects of video clips as part of a quest for hegemony.

Abounaddara have been producing an alternative form of film for over five years; they have been putting in place an artisanal mode of production that stands in contrast and resistance to traditional media.

This article began as a conversation that has taken place sporadically over a number of months between us, Stefan Tarnowski and Victoria Lupton, and the Abounaddara collective, as they fleshed out the idea of artisanal film production in framing their way of working. Our conversation progressed as follows: Abounaddara would select a film and briefly describe how it epitomised one aspect of their collaborative filmmaking process. We would then come at the film from our own angle, keeping in mind how it might represent an unusual mode of collaboration during times of revolution, tumult and war saturated with digital media. Having got to know the collective over the last few tumultuous years, our interjections are themselves written in the spirit of collaboration, a way of drawing out what we have learnt about the development of the collective and its mode of production.

1

Islamic State for Dummies

<https://vimeo.com/82362556>

Abounaddara: We decided to put ourselves in danger by critiquing the Islamist project: we interviewed its defenders without hiding our own secular position. The press functions through stereotypes: when journalists cover stories, they aim to find people who resemble the stories they tell. They pay lots of money for a fixer, someone to take them there. We did not have the funds to do this, nor the desire to find somebody who would resemble the stereotype of an Islamist. We heard of somebody from one of our cities who had recently adopted the Islamist ideology. He agreed to be interviewed by us because we were friends of friends. We held a different ideological position, but we were not outsiders.

VL/ST: To an extent, Abounaddara's films are deliberately decontextualized: existing almost out of time and place, we know only that this is Syria, today. By "today", we mean sometime after the 2011 revolution. We are not given names, or cities, or backgrounds – we're not fed the character's sect, their hometown. We are free of the way the *media* usually interpolates us into an experience of time or place or a character.

The result is that we all have different frames for understanding the work: the Arabic-speaking viewer may learn the protagonist's vague region of birth from the

accent, whilst a Syrian viewer may glean their exact provenance precisely from dress, or even the decoration on the walls. Abounaddara refuses to spoonfeed information about its subjects as objective “facts”, giving the work different layers of meaning depending on the audience.

Is this also part of the artisanal mode of production? It is certainly a way of working that sticks stubbornly to the acceptance of variation, of the local, that audiences of different backgrounds understand things in different ways. It moves us away from the media temptation to portray a series of archetypes: the masked or bearded ISIS fighter dressed in black, the veiled woman mourning hysterically.

There is a key moment in this video. The Islamist begins to set forth his programme: “If there were to be an Islamic state in this country” – and the camerawoman laughs. It is one of the only moments in Abounaddara’s body of work in which we become aware of the identity of the cameraperson. We hear the voice from behind the camera. We catch a glimpse behind the curtain of this anonymous collective. And we understand that the cameraperson is a woman and a Syrian.

Were Abounaddara to have a large production crew, a film like this would be impossible; had they been representatives from the media, they would have had to maintain “neutrality”. This laugh is a moment of complicity, and at the same time a moment of conflict. It is the moment in which the viewer realises that both interviewer and interviewee come from the same – Syrian – society.

The proponent of the Islamic State continues: “it would be as follows...” But already, the pure sound of that laugh has formed a crack, broken through the edifice the Islamist is trying to construct. There’s something almost earth shattering about that laugh – from the point of inception the Islamic State is undermined. The Islamist functionary shares a smile with Abounaddara, both aware of the absurdity of his proposals from the vantage point of Syrian society.

Abounaddara is able to infiltrate, build complicity, and then undermine. There is a vantage point that cuts across mainstream modes of production and the barrier between filmmaker and subject. It may be momentary, but we witness nonetheless that room for independence – or for interdependence – that emerged with the Syrian revolution in 2011, and the lasting hope that it remains in the daily interactions between Syrians.

2

The Sniper

<https://vimeo.com/92318539>

For our collective, this was one of the most difficult films we made: a difficulty we overcame by bringing the film towards the unlikely world of video games. This allowed us to find a common reference point between the spectator and the sniper. We wanted to find a link between the form of the interview and that of the video game – because there is a link. As an interview, the image quality was very poor. The difficulty in making this film was in post-production: finding the right graphics for this

work. We created a montage: the interview intercut with clips from YouTube. This took a long time, because it is a difficult decision to give a platform to a killer, and to make a montage of such a serious subject using clips from video games. The film is ambiguous: you don't know why the light goes on and off, you don't know whether Abounaddara is protecting the speaker or presenting him as a criminal. Perhaps it is both.

This is not a film that can be presented on mainstream television: the issue of whether the interviewee is being supported or opposed is too sensitive for TV. But the film attempts to tap into a shared set of images that people of a certain generation have, understanding how that is a lens for seeing the world. The film is of the utmost seriousness; but the aesthetics are a pastiche.

The name Abounaddara literally means “the man with the glasses” – the collective focuses its gaze on one small scene at a time, piercingly. It is also, in Arabic, a gently mocking moniker, a self-parody that plays with the idea of the intellectual. Many of Abounaddara’s films have some sense of the absurd, of play, or of outright satire; *Sniper* is an example of this use of play within a film of the utmost seriousness.

“The man with the glasses” is also a reference to Dziga Vertov, the radical Soviet documentary filmmaker, who begins his manifesto, *We*, with the sentence: “We call ourselves kinoks [cinema-eye people] as opposed to those “cinematographers” – a herd of junksmen doing rather well peddling their rags.”

Despite the enduring figure of the citizen journalist that emerged with the Arab Spring, a figure who was hailed as emancipatory for instigating a mode of non-hierarchical image production, today, producing images for social media in Syria has become a business. In the absence of traditional journalists and foreign correspondents on the ground in Syria, satellite TV news stations train stringers and commission them to produce clips for their mass audience. This footage, subsequently uploaded onto social media sites (primarily YouTube), meets a market demand for spectacular images – of death, destruction, horror – while posing as user-generated material. Part of the allure of these images is the impression they give viewers of their spontaneity – and thus authenticity.

It is these media-oriented spectacular images that Abounaddara shuns; and their artisanal production process – pastiching here, lampooning there – runs against the grain of this increasingly prevalent mode of social media production aligned with the mainstream media.

3

From Syria with Love

<https://vimeo.com/99277477>

This was also a very difficult film to make because it depicts missing people of whom we had to find photos, often in a very fragile state. We wanted to honour the missing. They are anonymous, like us. This film can be seen as a self-portrait. It took a long time to find these images. We had to search through the Facebook pages of

each person's friends or family. The subjects of the photographs are a diverse selection of people: some are well known, but the majority are only known by their family and friends. The idea is to show all of Syrian society, to feel its diversity – we found hundreds of images before selecting the ones in this film. The regime wants these images to disappear.

We are familiar with films of this kind – montages of still images, played to a backing track. The purposefully tacky aesthetic set against a generic soundtrack borrows from the language of online slideshows loved by many families in the Arab world. It also brings to mind such sequences as the [final scenes](#) of the sugarcoated Hollywood film *Love Actually*.

But the soft exterior masks the hard core of the film's message. The Syrian regime, joined today by various Islamist militias, has run a network of secret prisons, a gulag, into which over a hundred thousand people have disappeared since 2011. The most widely publicised evidence of this policy of enforced disappearance was the Caesar photographs. These were a cache of images smuggled out by a photographer employed by the regime to photograph the corpses of its victims, so that families would be given proof of their death without being allowed to collect their bodies, and thus hold funerals, from which further protests could be launched.

Certain Islamist militias, such as the Saudi and Western-backed Jaysh al-Islam, have also begun to imitate this regime policy of enforced disappearance. Smuggled into the images of everyday Syrians are faces that are momentarily recognizable. As the slideshow speeds up, we glimpse Samira al-Khalil, one of the Douma 4, who was kidnapped in Jaysh al-Islam-controlled Douma in late 2013. She had spent three years working for the Violations Documentation Centre in Syria, a body that had ironically set itself the task of recording the name and circumstances of everyone killed or detained since 2011. Samira's own fate remains unknown.

The Violations Documentation Centre was helping to build a sense of civil society in Syria. In much the same way, over the last five years, through its interviews with Syrians from all walks of life, Abounaddara has been building a portrait of Syrian society as a whole during a period of crisis. "From Syria With Love" shows that process on a miniature scale, while of course caricaturing it. As this short film also shows, it is a project that Abounaddara undertakes diligently and seriously, while not taking itself too seriously.

All too often, the media presents us with images of the Arab world claimed as authentic. *From Syria with Love* hacks into these images, taking a cinematic trope with which we are familiar and applying to it the artisanal approach – slow, meticulous, deeply engaged with the people it represents. It brings to mind the [hacking of the set of the US series *Homeland*](#) by the Arabian Street Artists group, who were commissioned by the series to graffiti the set in a way that would be "natural in a Syrian refugee camp", but daubed it in slogans that criticised and satirised the show's essentialising narratives.

From Syria with Love resists the impulse of the Syrian regime and the media to make

these people disappear: to feed the impression that society has been hollowed out and that Syrians today are either militiamen or soldiers, represented by the posters of martyrs ubiquitous in Arab countries. These images are gleaned from Facebook and other social media sites, reflecting the finished film's distribution through such platforms.

4

The Truth About Osama

<https://vimeo.com/103431354>

Our collective is bruised by the prolonged absence of Oussama, but it's out of the question to submit to defeatism, for the fight must continue. Oussama was arrested. It's a political issue: we can't just weep for him, and we can't ask the viewer to feel sorry for every person arrested. He himself would always laugh at people who cried about this kind of thing. So we decided to focus on one aspect of his personality, to give a snapshot of him. He's a young guy who plays video games, so we created this film with video game music, music that itself mocks the situation and imprints itself on your memory. We detest defeatism and despair. To reduce Syrians to victims is to ignore the political struggle for dignity to which they are giving their lives.

Oussama is a member of the Abounaddara collective; the only member aside from Charif whose name is on public record. It was a weighty decision to publicize his name: when Oussama was first detained, the collective kept silent. Publicising the names of the disappeared can lead to regime retribution.

When news of Oussama stopped arriving, Abounaddara took the decision to produce this film in conversation with Oussama's family, his lawyer and Human Rights Watch, deciding that there would be no danger to him and possibly some benefit by announcing that he was missing, provided that in the film he was not doing anything incriminating. His name has since appeared in campaigns and panels across international media. Abounaddara has made five films about him.

5

Watch your brain

<https://vimeo.com/106530839>

We do not want to imprison ourselves within documentary, the representation of the real...

The production cost of this film was zero. Abounaddara wanted to articulate a message against sectarianism. They appropriated a cheap clip found on the Internet, subverting it to refer to the deeply embedded colonial fallacies of scientific racism. Once again, the artisanal process takes form in a hacking of readymade material, over which is stitched a message.

6

This is Syria

<https://vimeo.com/119548907>

We decided to work with Syrian television. But we added the one thing that is never included on Syrian television: the people.

Found footage from Syrian national TV broadcasts, which show the country's landmarks – Damascus' Umayyad Mosque, Palmyra's columns, Hama's water wheels – are set against a pop song titled "This Is Syria", whose credits are included towards the end of the video.

Arab music videos are usually bookended with credits; in this case we simply read: "Thank you to all those who contributed to the making of this film."

Abounaddara cuts these stock TV images with those of a beggar on the streets in Syria: we see him standing, a lone human amidst the traffic. The video is playfully credited as "in collaboration with Syrian television". The act of stealing is here reframed as collaboration, facilitated by the anonymity of the collective. This "collaboration" collapses the gulf between state culture and popular culture, imagination and reality, official representation and life on the streets. In doing so, it uses modes of production that stand in opposition to official culture (clean, expensive, untainted by poverty), with the emphasis clearly placed on collage (blurred ownership, the remix, the cover, kitsch).

Anonymous and independent by virtue of being unfunded, Abounaddara is accountable to nobody. Their films reflect these material conditions. Sometimes, they appropriate and remix rather than shooting new footage made for their weekly message. (Equally, their work does not stay strictly in the realm of cinema: articles and opeds form a crucial part of their work, activating a different, non-filmmaker segment of their collaborators.)

Abounaddara have made two films in this format: the other, from 2011, is entitled "The End of the Broadcast" and shows a television broadcasting the flag of the Syrian Arab Republic waving in the wind, accompanied by the national anthem. This is the stock image played on state television at the end of the day's programming. The subversive and optimistic message: the regime itself, and its media, will also come to an end.

7

Il Faut Faire Quelque Chose

<https://vimeo.com/128853153>

How to connect our struggle with that of neighbouring civil societies?

This is Abounaddara's first film shot far from Syria or its neighbouring countries. It serves as a reminder that the war in Syria does not take place in isolation, exclusively within Syria's borders, somewhere over there. We use the phrase "war in Syria" intentionally, because this is not a civil war, not a Syrian war, but rather a war wrought by major regional and international powers on Syrian soil, each acting directly or through their favoured and shifting proxy militias and militaries.

The Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015 and the subsequent “Je suis Charlie” slogan marked a new consciousness amongst Europeans: a moment of realization that war in Syria has direct repercussions in European cities. More urgently than ever schools felt the need to understand this reality and find ways to engage with issues that were being simplified under the term “radicalization”.

Abounaddara was invited by French schools to present their films. The collective used the opportunity to listen to the students talk about their society in the context of the surrounding events. “Il Faut Faire Quelque Chose” is filmed at the Collège Germaine Tillion in Paris, named after the French anthropologist and Resistance member, drawing a link between the contemporary Syrian resistance and the French Résistance.

8

The Child Who Saw the Islamic State

<https://vimeo.com/127905982>

We cannot access ISIS to film them – and anyway we are interested in the details of everyday life, not soldiers in all their military gear. So we found an alternative way to tell the story.

We never depict gratuitous violence in our films. Indeed, we rarely show violence at all: we have edited the few violent scenes we have included in such a way that the viewer is unable to watch merely out of voyeurism. There is a slaughter scene in one of our films, but we have edited it so that it sears itself onto the spectator’s mind, before the eye realises what it is witnessing.

If you’re working with a production company you need to support the office and sell your films – so you’ll shoot something that TV stations like. That mode of production enforces certain subjects that are certain to sell. Because we aren’t about selling films, this allows us to treat the subject in a very different way.

Abounaddara avoids gratuitous violence. How then to deal with all the violence documented in video clips shot on cameraphones and circulated on YouTube? To refuse to watch, or to see, would be to close one’s eyes to a large part of the reality of war in Syria.

But one of the benefits of refusing to show violence is that it divorces Abounaddara from a certain temporality, a certain experience of the passing of time. And this is crucial. Because the media, for example, pick up on a clip, an execution video say, circulate it, comment on it, and then move on to the next event. But the clips remain there, static, even after media temporality has skidded on to the next event. What are the effects of those clips? How do they seep through? What happens when they leak into the popular consciousness, or the popular unconscious?

These are questions that a media temporality can’t answer – an experience of time that is focussed on seeing, rather than witnessing.

In Abounaddara's 'The Child Who Saw the Islamic State,' [our emphasis] beginning with the title itself, we enter into the interplay between seeing and witnessing. An event is described – a Daesh execution on a public square, a central thoroughfare in an unnamed city somewhere in Syria. We don't know where it is, but we know it's a place people have to cross when they pass from one neighbourhood to another. The man sits shrouded in darkness. We see only his silhouette against the pink curtains glowing behind him.

The first striking thing about the silhouetted man's testimony was how perfectly it fit the schema of trauma that Freud sketches in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. We can picture the boy smiling as he saws at his sister's neck with the blunt edge of a kitchen knife, playing, or so Freud says, to produce pleasure from a traumatic experience. The action is not exactly imitative – think the blunt edge of the knife – but rather a passing on of experience. The brother passes on the mantle of violence to the sister. The violence has seeped in and is spreading through the family. And the family, with its implicit hierarchy, is an institution perhaps uniquely capable of absorbing or reflecting state, and now militia, violence.

But what then is the difference between this act of witnessing, shown by Abounaddara as emerging from within the family, and the way we see, or watch, violence pass us by in a media event? Perhaps by bearing witness to this testimony of violence is the chance of healing – at least, so Freud would say.

But perhaps the opposite is true. Again, according to Freud, the pleasure of an act decreases with repetition. Well, clips are made to loop, they repeat again and again. Maybe even the modest cathartic effect of this act of bearing witness will be diminished with each viewing. As clips of horror accumulate online, as the scars accumulate, and as we experience the media's skid from one event to another while we look on at the endlessly unfolding horror, these ever-weakening cathartic loops released by Abounaddara don't stand a chance.

The film is shocking; but it is key that the child is not filmed. Like another of Abounaddara's films, "[Don't Forget the Plums](#)", "The Child Who Saw the Islamic State" finds a way to examine both the latent and blatant violence in Syria today, bearing witness without showing the violent acts that undermine the dignity of their subjects.

9

GoBro: The War from Within

<https://vimeo.com/133165613>

This is the first advertisement that Abounaddara ever directed.

This film takes its title from the popular brand of small action cameras, with a letter changed that manages to reference the machismo of war and frontline journalism whilst gently mocking the Arabic speaker's English accent. The GoPro is the camera of choice for many of those active in the war in Syria – activists, fighters on all sides,

but perhaps especially ISIS fighters – a camera made to record action shots in real-time.

In a sense, the GoPro exemplifies the images of war that have emerged in the last four years in Syria. Syria has been a testing ground, a prototype, for a new way of mediating conflicts. With images no longer produced directly by large satellite news companies, Abounaddara has coined the phrase “the war from within”.

Images taken by fighters themselves, in the midst of battle, uploaded on platforms such as YouTube, are gleaned from social media by satellite news channels. And since these clips are not produced directly by the mainstream media, there has been a marked rise in graphic scenes of violence and horror which they choose to broadcast and relay. On the one hand, this has given the impression that the distance once separating consumers of news from the battle scene has shrunk, while on the other hand, the loosening of journalistic standards and newsgathering protocols has served to transform Syria into the land of alien, spectacular horror.

Abounaddara stand in opposition to both the trampling of what they describe as “dignity” evident in war footage, and the obfuscation of economic interests resulting from the anonymity of social media platforms. It is useful to note here the difference between this anonymity – which obscures an affiliation with powers and a lack of independence – with the anonymity proposed by Abounaddara, which is precisely based on independence and play – with the ability to create critical films without putting its collaborators in danger.

The collective opposes the commercialization of violent images from Syria; “GoPro: The War from Within” satirizes this trend, taking the form of an advertisement for the new must-have media war toy.

10

Kill Them

<https://vimeo.com/116944509>

We wanted to remember that the Syrian tragedy cannot be addressed independently of its global media representation. The “right to the image” we have been fighting for challenges this media representation.

After much discussion, Abounaddara announced on social media that “We are Charlie”, joining the movement of people aligning themselves with the magazine and its right to publish after the shootings that killed 12 people. They had hesitated before taking the decision: the publication is not without its problems in its representation of Muslims and the Arab region more generally. But the magazine’s contributors had been killed simply for drawing, and Abounaddara’s members felt that this could have been them; in fact, this had been them, in Syria. They had no choice but to say that they were Charlie, despite the troubling nature of the catchphrase hashtag.

The #JeSuisCharlie mantra was taken up by individuals ranging from free speech activists to Islamophobic commentators and far-right parties. It was important for the collective to balance their support for the statement with a reminder of the dangers of this side of the discourse: it was released soon after their statement of “Nous Sommes Charlie” [[hyperlink](#)]

BIOGRAPHIES

Abounaddara is an anonymous collective of volunteer, self-taught artists whose practice is founded on the principle of emergency and an attitude of defiance towards established powers and the culture industry. Since the onset of the Syrian revolution, Abounaddara has produced weekly self-funded, short films, made freely available to the public online since April 2011. These films are anonymous and open-ended. They offer a glimpse of ordinary Syrians without restricting them to political or religious affiliations, while focusing on the details of daily life and evoking horror without ever showing it. The films do not look to prove a point, but rather to defend the rights of the nameless to a dignified image.

In 2015, Abounaddara was awarded the Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics and launched a major exhibition and conference at the New School in New York. The collective was awarded the Special Mention in the 2015 Venice Biennale, from which they subsequently withdrew ([please click here](#) to see their statement at the time) and participates regularly in the Human Rights Watch film festival.

Stefan Tarnowski is a writer and PhD candidate in Anthropology at Columbia University. He was the Assistant Director and then Education Programme Director of Beirut Art Center, and was a participant in Ashkal Alwan’s Home Workspace Programme 2013-14. His writing on art has been published in Camera Austria and Art Asia Pacific among others, and he is a regular subtitler and translator.

Victoria Lupton is a cultural organiser and theatre maker and the Project Manager of How to work together. Having spent years living in Beirut as Assistant Director of Ashkal Alwan, she is founding director of Seenaryo (www.seenaryo.org), which creates cultural projects with refugees in Lebanon, and directs SEAL (Social and Economic Action for Lebanon).

Tarnowski and Lupton have collaborated on various projects including a translation of the play The Final Return by Ghiath al Mhithawi with the Royal Court Theatre (2016) and an interview with George Shire about Stuart Hall for Beirut Art Center (2015).

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