

'Record!/ I am an Arab': Palestine Note Talks to Rasha Salti About the Digital Film Revolution

Sam Williams

[insert image: http://www.transmediale.de/files/images/projects/Zobeidi_Red_1_0.jpeg]

[Red, Green and Black Indians by Sobhi al-Zobeidi, 2007](#)

Hollywood movies teach their audiences how to understand film through genres. For those of us outside the Middle East, it's from twenty-four hour news we learn what to expect: soldiers and screaming women, angry men and crying children, confusion and explosions, unfathomable politics, cities-as-codenames and death-as-statistics. At the apex of this phenomenon, and at the bottom of a pile of images, lies Palestine. As maps and news footage, photos and humanitarian aid ads, "Palestine" becomes a generalized spectacle of conflict without story or cause. Rasha Salti, Lebanese curator of the online video platform, ArabShorts explains: "In this region, videos are emerging in a landscape saturated with fabricated images... In the current historical and political situation of the Arab world, video and film practice is one of the sharpest and most striking political acts."

[ArabShorts](#) is an experiment. Funded by the Goethe Institute in Cairo, "Hollywood" of the Middle East, ArabShorts' nine curators gather films from different Arab countries and present them online. In February, Salti, a writer and curator of several film festivals in the Middle East as well as the forthcoming [Sharjah Biennial](#), brought a programme to Berlin's Transmediale, International Festival for Art and Digital Culture. It was called *Agit-prop, Punks and Poets: Digital Media between Film, Video and Activism in the Arab world*. "These films show how digital media are used in subversive ways," Salti explains: "They're alternative, and their main attribute is a search for a new 'identity' or language. Digital media allow for new approaches to production, taking independence from conventional structures. This material independence inspired immaterial creativity. It's the beginning of a revolution."

But what does the revolution look like? Though Salti emphasizes the diversity of "Arab" films from country to country, revolution insists on a shared vision. "Experimental filmmaking is precisely the kind of filmmaking that allows for the representation of the tumult of everyday life in areas of conflict," she says. "More so than narrative cinema. But these videos aren't 'experimental' as such. I think they're part of a genre that has yet to find its niche. Taysir Batniji's *Transit* is meant as video art, but it has a cinematic dimension."

Narrative or not, *Transit*, like each of the films in the programme, tells stories. One of these – how, armed with digital technology, filmmakers and artists can intervene in difficult milieux – is the master-narrative. But more interesting are the stories those artists are bringing back with them.

[Transit still insert: http://www.transmediale.de/files/images/event/S42_Transit.jpg]

Transit is a series of film stills, portraits and scenes shot secretly in routes of passage between Egypt and Gaza. Photography in these places is forbidden. It documents the artist's own journeys between Cairo and Rafah. Batniji bookends scenes of life with images of planes and buses coming and going. Between transports lie hidden spaces, where ad hoc communities assemble on border crossings: meetings take place in freight yards, children play on waiting room floors, and families sleep beside shopping trolleys containing their belongings. It may be experimental, but the

storytelling technique is as old as *The Decameron*, or *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Sobhi Al-Sobaidi's *Red, Green, Black and White Indians* shows Palestinian protestors in Bil'in. During a visit by Condoleezza Rice in 2007, "Red Indian" protestors wave banners: "Mrs. Rice, The Indian wars are not over. We are still here too." The act is inspired by 'Speech of the Red Indian' (1992), by Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish. Addressed to Columbus in the voice of a Native American under colonial rule, the poem speaks through America's responsibility for the state of Palestine, into the immediate present: "Into what abyss/is this robot bristling with aircraft carriers and jets/consigning the earth?/To what fathomless pit/will you descend?/ It's yours to decide."

Al-Sobaidi's film cuts between black and white, and different grades of colour. The film shows clips of the same event are variously treated to look like scraps of found footage from different sources, and different periods. Al-Sobaidi chops in scenes digitally manipulated to look like degraded newsreel, amateur mobile phone footage, and grainy black and white that might be archived newsreel of Native Americans in the early 20th Century, or silent Hollywood film. The quality of an image gives us visual clues as to how to interpret what appears on our screens. Al-Sobaidi isolates those clues by applying different image qualities to the same event, Sobaidi both clues us in to how we process images, and compresses a sprawling historical context into a few seconds of film. Images, like politics, have baggage.

http://web.mac.com/sobhi/alZobaidi/red,_green,_black_and_white_Indians.html [embed]

This is the political power and problem of images from Palestine and other areas of the Arab world. That the protest is being recorded means a story is being told, and lives witnessed – 'Record!/ I am an Arab', wrote Darwish. But digital images are covered in anxiety: Who is recording and why? Have the images been treated in Photoshop, like Reuters' clone-tooled smokestacks over [Beirut](#)? Is this a Hollywood film, a video game, news footage, or a Youtube video? Who by? The US Army? Insurgent groups? Bystanders? Under what conditions? Under the weight of all these images, the stories that generate them threaten collapse, and records disappearance.

"The protestors in Bil'in have been very creative, Salti comments: "They met [Rice] at the checkpoint for passage to Ramallah, dressed as Native Americans because she is American. When the blockbuster *Avatar* was released, they showed up to protest sites dressed as characters from the film. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KStnbXWfnuk&feature=player_embedded [embed]

The ArabShorts film programme at the Transmediale isn't 'political art'. It's just that politics is inescapable. In Raina Stephen's *Lebanon / War*, a woman, married in a refugee camp during the first Lebanon War, returns during the second war with her children. "These are profoundly committed, critical and dissenting filmmakers who take risks and to make independently minded films that denounce injustice, challenge official discourse and narrative." Salti says.

When digital first media emerged, European and American commentators assembled to herald a revolution and proclaim technotopias and a radical democratization of artistic production, even in regions with strong censorship. But the revolution didn't go according to plan. It was true that material and equipment could be more easily accessed, but viral distribution networks are wildly unpredictable. A lot of the content produced was poor quality. This led to the increasing importance of curators and festivals. The Transmediale festival in Berlin, which began in the days of videotape, became a docking station for films and video works outside mainstream distribution networks.

"As elsewhere, digital media has caused a small revolution, enabling low-cost production and an emergent independent, art-house, auteur movement," Salti says of the Middle East.

“In parallel, almost every country of the "Arab world", has at least one or two art-house cinemas that screen these films as well as world cinema. There are small festivals – independent – that also take risks. They have small budgets and show extraordinarily innovative, courageous and daring films. The films are usually low-budget, made with private funding, often European production grants. They sometimes have to deal with intervention from public bodies, and are either refused a license for commercial release, or are systematically chastised by the official press. In some cases a filmmaker's membership to her/his union is revoked... But invariably filmmakers and critics and cinéphiles have fought back.”

“It's so hard to get these films out there,” Marcel Schwierin and filmmaker told Palestine Note. Schwierin developed ArabShorts at the request of Goethe Institute in Cairo, which was responding to demand from German film festivals for Egyptian films. On making inquiries in Egypt, the Institute discovered that networks with filmmakers in other Arab Countries were poor or non-existent:

"The conditions these films are made in require a lot of courage. They're often "shoot 'n' run" films: filmmakers get the shot, and run for it before police arrive. Then there's the censorship and the bureaucracy. It's really tough. Europe is a very safe environment. European filmmakers can learn a lot from the commitment of filmmakers in the Middle East.”

In this context, the Palestinian situation opens up unexpected possibilities for filmmakers, according to Salti: “Palestinians are more prolific than Algerian or Syrian film-makers because there's no actual state, state structures or censoring body; the state isn't able to police expression closely”, she says. *(But they may have to deal with the censorship and bureaucracy of the Israeli state: see <http://www.righttoenter.ps> for example – ed.)*

“We need to be recognized as something other than "native informants" or curios,” Salti says. “We don't come to Harun Farocki screenings because he is a German native informant, but because he is an artist who has crafted a new language for thinking his being in the world. The entire world is engaged in the same learning process: artists are asking similar questions, motivated by similar desires or challenges. The new languages we forge should not be regarded strictly from and of the Arab world.” Indeed.

Berlin is a comparatively safe place to be political: The home of the Transmediale Festival is a Europe cultural centre, an artist's laboratory, where “experimental” and politically confrontational film and art can survive, even thrive – part of the city's carefully-constructed “poor but sexy” aesthetic. Now heavily funded by the German government, Transmediale is an example of this. Beginning life as VideoFest, an alternative to the Berlinale (itself Berlin's alternative to Cannes) Transmediale grew out of early 1990s DIY Super8 culture. Among Transmediale's themes in recent years, have been ‘Do it Yourself!’ ‘Go Public!’ and ‘Play Global’, it's ambitions peaking in 2004 with ‘Fly Utopia!’

"Al-Sobaidi's film doesn't belong to the "experimental" idiom Europe is familiar with," Salti says, but plays with the language of ethnographic film and its practice.” It feels different too. Surveying the posed attitudes of rebellion popular among artists on the Berlin gallery circuit promoted as ‘edgy’ or ‘experimental’, one has to wonder if the European avant-garde has forgotten what the

experiment was for. The MO for the European avant-garde since the 1960s has been scripted by founder of the Situationist International, Guy Debord, who proposed: "The question is this only: will we do something new?" The resulting pursuit of novelty has often proved disappointing. It has led to a proliferation of concepts, building concept on concept, and developing concepts to deal with the concepts. Out of this has grown an industry of intellectualism, that is at worst defeatist, and at its best – and perhaps often enough – delusional, but never, never visionary.

ArabShorts remains an experiment. The Goethe Institute hopes to fund it for another year. At the moment, it's a one-off: a curated platform that plugs geographical and distribution gaps connecting films and festivals in Arab states to each other and to those of Europe. Perhaps further. The simple act of embedding these films on a domain page, instead of allowing them to drift through the "trash environments" of Vimeo and YouTube, is a significant step, says Schwierin: "It's a model other activists and filmmakers can copy."

"There are not yet many initiatives reaching out to the Middle East, or to Arab cinema," Salti says:

"Things will take some time, there are many obstacles, but I think it will eventually happen... As you can imagine, these films generate debate. There is now a well-attuned audience and interregional solidarity. The political impact is obvious. These films allow conversations about subjects that are silenced. They impose a different discourse, vocabulary and perspective. The expectation is tremendous."

'Agit-Prop, Punks and Poets: Digital Media between Film, Video and Activism in the Arab world' (full programme below) appeared on Thursday February 4 2010, at the [Transmediale HYPERLINK "http://www.transmediale.de/en/agit-prop-punks-and-poets-digital-media-between-fi"](http://www.transmediale.de/en/agit-prop-punks-and-poets-digital-media-between-fi) Festival at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures) in Berlin. Rasha Salti and Marcel Schwierin were guest curators of the Transmediale film programme.

The Poster, Samer Barkawi, sy 2008, 4min

Red, Green and Black Indians, Sobhi al-Sobaidi, ps 2007, 1min

We Will Win, Mahmoud Hojeij, lb 2007, 8min

Faces Applauding Alone, Ahmad Ghossein, lb 2008, 7min

Straight Stories – Part 1, Bouchra Khalili, ma/fr/es, 2006, 10min

Transit, Taysir Batniji, ps/fr, 2004, 8min

Lebanon / War (Lebanon Slash War), Rania Stephan, lb 2006, 30min