POLARIS

The director Ossama Mohammed says, "In Syria, what we keep inside our imagination—what we don't tell—that is the main reality."

Photograph by Kate Brooks.

LETTER FROM DAMASCUS

CAPTURED ON FILM

Can dissident filmmakers effect change in Syria?

BY LAWRENCE WRIGHT

"On the one side, it's a tragedy that I have made only two feature films in thirty years," the Syrian director Ossama Mohammed told me last month. "Yet, from the other side, I see it as a miracle." We were sitting in the Rawda Café, the center of the modest intellectual life of Damascus, where television stars, screenwriters, and poets gather for leisurely mid-morning chats. The clatter of backgammon boards and the smell of apple-flavored tobacco from *sheesha* pipes filled the room. A man in a black jacket at the next table, who appeared to be reading a magazine, occasionally leaned toward our conversation.

"In Syria, we have this huge army of secret police and a complete absence of legal protections," Mohammed said, in a quiet, angry voice. "You can go to jail for thirty-five years and nobody will ask about you." He is fifty-two and broad-chested, with an unruly beard and wiry gray hair streaming down his back; his eyes are the same color as his habitual unsmoked cigar. "People here have a sense of the balance of forces," he said. "They realize they are not strong enough to resist." He cautioned, "In Syria, what we keep inside our imagination—what we *don't* tell—that is the main reality."

Nearly every Middle Eastern country is governed by an authoritarian regime, but that hasn't kept many of those countries—notably, Iran and Egypt—from developing surprisingly lively cinematic traditions. In a quarrelsome, voluble region, Syria is a strangely muted place. I wondered if, by examining Syrian movies and talking to Syrian filmmakers, I could glimpse this closely guarded inner world.

Mohammed's films, "Stars in Broad Daylight" (1988) and "Sacrifices" (2002), are merciless indictments of the Baathist dictatorship that has controlled Syria since 1963, when it came to power in a military coup. Both movies have received international acclaim; they were presented at the Cannes Film Festival, and "Stars" won first prize at the Festival of Valencia and at the International Festival of Rabat. This month, they will be shown in America, as part of a retrospective of Syrian cinema, at Lincoln Center. "Stars" explores the toxic effect of totalitarianism on ordinary Syrians, as seen through the internal battles of a dysfunctional family. The oldest of three children works for the phone company, where he casually listens in on telephone calls. Corrupt and brutally insouciant, he forces his siblings to become engaged to people they despise, in order to expand his land holdings. He encourages his brother to savagely beat their sister's suitor, then makes his sister get involved with a member of the regime, who rapes her. Not coincidentally, the actor playing this monstrous character looks like Hafez al-Assad—the man who ruled Syria for nearly thirty years, until his death, in 2000. Funny, violent, and blunt, "Stars" is perhaps the greatest film to come out of Syria. It should have been the début of a director of international stature. Both "Stars" and "Sacrifices" required years of negotiation with government censors, and, in both cases, after Mohammed completed the film, his final cut was rejected, meaning that the film was effectively banned at home.

Although many foreign critics have portrayed Mohammed and other Syrian directors as symbols of artistic victimization, he defiantly rejects that role. "Do you want me to play the hero?" he asked. "Do you want me to repeat two hundred times each day that my films are forbidden? This is my society. I belong to this world. I am *not* a victim."

Yet a look around the Rawda Café suggests that the creative class in Syria has a lot of time on its hands. One writer I met has a job counting the city's street lamps. Most of the country's

"I am a golem, but on weekends I do Domino's."

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filmmakers, including Mohammed, are employees of the National Film Organization, which manages the production of all Syrian films. Mohammed is paid two hundred and fifty dollars a month, which is the average government wage. This salary allows filmmakers to pay their rent and spend much of their day idling at the Rawda, which has the atmosphere of a perpetual, brooding salon. For the past few years, Mohammed told me, he has been adapting "Manifest Illusions," a deeply psychological memoir by Raja al-Taey, a Syrian feminist; but he recently set the project aside. The National Film Organization has a small budget, and produces only one or two movies a year, so there's no rush.

The Syrian government and the filmmakers have developed an odd, uncomfortable dependency upon each other. Ibrahim Hamidi, the Damascus bureau chief for the pan-Arab newspaper *Al Hayat*, which is published in London, says, "By permitting Ossama Mohammed and others to make movies financed by the government, the regime is harming the filmmakers' credibility, and also trying to contain them. The films get awards abroad, which is good P.R. for the regime. At the same time, Syrians aren't allowed to see the movies." While filmmakers have the opportunity to test the limits of government censorship, the regime acquires an intimate sense of the mood of the nation's intellectuals. "The people who rule Syria are not stupid," Hamidi said. "They play a very sophisticated game."

Nevertheless, the interchange between the filmmakers and the Assad regime may be the most significant political dialogue in the country today. "I have an obsession with facing authority," Mohammed said. "This society is responsible for creating the dictatorship—it's in our culture, our way of believing and thinking. I am trying to expose the authority inside us and the shadow of political authority in front of our doors."

The Rawda Café is in a neighborhood of dowdy, utilitarian apartments that were built during the nineteen-seventies and eighties, when the stripped-down, socialist model became the architectural aesthetic in many Arab countries. Damascus climbs up Mt. Qassioun, a treeless khaki-colored ridge that overlooks the city. Unlike in most cities with mountain vistas, the higher the neighborhood the poorer the inhabitants. In the evenings, the peasants on the high slope may smoke a *sheesha* in a patch of meadow and look down on the city lights.

A few blocks away from the café is the Syrian Parliament Building, with its requisite portraits of Hafez al-Assad and his son Bashar, who has run the country since his father's death. Forty years of Baathist rule has resulted in a near-total elimination of political opposition. In 1980, Hafez began a series of mass arrests, in an attempt to eliminate dissidents. Two years later, he ordered the destruction of Hama, a northern city that was a stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood, the insurrectionary Islamist group. As many as twenty-five thousand people were killed, and the city was bulldozed, as a warning to those who might defy his authority. Even now, anyone suspected of belonging to the Brotherhood can be executed without trial.

The Parliament Building is across the street from the Cham Palace, the only movie theatre in the capital that shows current releases. For the past several weeks, "Big Momma's House 2," the Martin Lawrence comedy, has been running. When I went, on a Thursday evening, there was a small audience of families with children. Damascus was once home to dozens of first-run theatres, but, because moviegoing draws people together in a communal experience, the Baathist regime considers it a

dangerous habit. Starting in the nineteen-eighties, Party thugs began disrupting film audiences; at the same time, the selection of movies officially offered became smaller and smaller, and the theatres, which were forbidden to raise ticket prices, deteriorated. "Two decades ago, there were a hundred and twenty cinemas in Syria," one filmmaker told me. "Now there are only six that are functioning." As the country's cinemas fell into ruin, Syrians increasingly stayed indoors.

Ossama Mohammed fondly recalls the time when Syrians went to the movies regularly. One of nine children, he grew up in Latakia, a town on the Mediterranean coast. "Before 1963, people could see films the same year they were produced," he said. When "Spartacus," the 1960 Kubrick classic, came to town, he said, "I didn't have money to go to the cinema, so I would steal from my brother Ali and invite my friends. Ali discovered this, and he brought a big stick and said, 'For every franc you steal, I will beat you once.' I thought about it, and the next day I stole three francs. It was worth it!"

Mohammed's father was a teacher at an elementary school where corporal punishment was commonplace. "But I am proud that my father didn't do that once," he said. "At school, I was punished hundreds of times. Once, I warned a teacher who was going to beat me. I was used to fighting on the streets. I said, 'If you strike me, I will hit you back.' He didn't believe me. So I beat him up. I was sixteen."

Thrown out of Latakia's schools, Mohammed moved to Damascus to finish high school. The following year, one of his sisters, a doctor, called with some good news. She had saved the life of a government official who was in charge of giving foreign-study scholarships to Syrian students. "Do you want to study in Russia?" she asked Mohammed.

"Study what?"

"Medicine," she proposed.

"No."

"Engineering?"

"No."

"Film?"

Mohammed remembered "Spartacus," and agreed. In 1974, he enrolled at the renowned Russian State Institute of Cinematography, or V.G.I.K., which had produced many masters of cinema, including Andrei Tarkovsky and Vasily Shukshin. In Moscow, Mohammed met another Syrian, Mohammed Malas, who was in his final year at V.G.I.K., and Malas introduced him to his mentor, Igor Talankin, who accepted Mohammed as a protégé.

A third Syrian, Abdullatif Abdulhamid, arrived in Moscow in 1975. He was the son of a military officer in the Golan Heights. Once a month, a film—usually Egyptian or Lebanese—was shown in the main square of the little town where he lived. The screen was propped up on a car beside the square, and the dialogue could barely be heard over the roar of a generator. Despite the primitive conditions, Abdulhamid became captivated by the world of cinema. "For a month, I used to imitate all the sounds of the movie, until the next one appeared," he told me.

Upon returning home from Russia, the three Syrians attempted to create an indigenous cinema. In 1974, Malas, along with Omar Amiralay, another young filmmaker, founded the Damascus Cinema Club. Amiralay, who became an accomplished documentarian, had already angered the regime by depicting the despair of rural peasants in "Everyday Life in a Syrian Village," a documentary, released that year, that sharply undercut the government's boasts about agrarian reform. The film was banned. Three years later, Amiralay made "The Chickens," a critical look at the government's clumsy efforts to stimulate private industry. He focussed on a village where the peasants put everything they owned into the poultry business, even turning their houses into chicken coops. A plague among the chickens forced the villagers into bankruptcy, but they continued to pursue their ill-advised investment. At the end of the film, the clucking of chickens drowns out the speech of the village's doomed capitalists.

Amiralay said of the cinema club, "We showed the kind of films we dreamed of making." Using projectors borrowed from the Soviet cultural center, the club members set up a screening room in the ground floor of an apartment building. The room, which faced a garden, was too cramped for the film to be projected in front of the screen. So they turned to Nazih Shahbandar, an elderly man who had pioneered movie projection in Syria by making all the equipment himself. Shahbandar set up the projector in an adjoining kitchen and projected the image onto a mirror in the garden, which reflected it onto the rear of the screen. In that manner, the cinema club presented the works of Bergman, Fellini, and Godard. It showed few Syrian films. "Third World film in general is very poor, with the notable exception of India in the fifties and sixties, especially the movies of Satyajit Ray," Amiralay said. "He made from the tragedy of his country a noble artistic cinema."

The screenings were followed by impassioned debates, which provided a safe way to discuss the filmmakers' larger predicament. Club members held screenwriting seminars and technical workshops, and published a magazine, *Film.* The French comic actor and director Jacques Tati visited the club, and the Italian writer and director Pier Paolo Pasolini came to speak when he was shooting "Medea" in Aleppo. In 1978, in conjunction with the French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma,* the club sponsored two weeks of "cinema and politics." There were two screenings a day in a seven-hundred-seat theatre rented for the occasion. "We sold out every performance," Amiralay recalled. The critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma* had chosen eighteen films, but the Syrian government banned more than half of them. Instead, the French critic Serge Daney sat on the stage and narrated detailed descriptions of them. "It was a screening without an image—an absolutely beautiful happening," Amiralay said.

The Assad government's huge crackdown began two years later. Hundreds of dissidents were imprisoned and tortured. Amiralay discovered that his name was on a list of people to be arrested, and he moved to France. Most

of the filmmakers who worked for the government, however, stayed and tried to practice their craft in a society that was cowed and broken.

Fares Helou is one of Syria's biggest movie and television stars. He is a burly man with tightly curled hair and a heavy, expressive face. Helou, who is forty-five, is also known for declaring his negative views of the regime, and he has continued to do so even in the face of a new wave of arrests which began last fall. "I'm loved as an actor, so I'm protected," he said one afternoon at the Rawda Café. Indeed, as we talked, fans approached him for autographs and snapshots. But his friends worry that Helou's career has been damaged by his political stance. "His star-o-meter is going down," one of them told me. "People are afraid to work with him. Maybe he's not as protected as he thinks he is."

Helou fell in love with cinema while studying at Syria's Higher Institute of Theatre; soon after graduating, he got a role in Mohammed Malas's second feature film, "The Night" (1993). Subsequent television roles have made him known throughout the Arab world. (Syrian miniseries are ubiquitous on Arab satellite television.) I asked him if things had changed in Syria since the ascent to power of Bashar al-Assad, who has presented himself to the West as a reformer. "We had the same amount of freedom, or more, in Hafez's time," Helou said. "Hafez, at least, was clear—with any position, you knew exactly the space that was allowed. But after the son came in the freedom given us was not real; it was a trap. When voices started to be heard presenting new and modern ideas, the regime arrested those voices." On March 8th, the annual celebration of the Baath military coup, about a hundred and fifty demonstrators gathered peacefully in front of the Ministry of Justice. Hundreds of Baathist college students, members of a paramilitary brigade, attacked the demonstration, beating the protesters indiscriminately. While the police stood aside and watched, a well-known female novelist, Samar Yazbek, was bludgeoned.

As Helou and I were talking, a young fan in a jean jacket and a checked shirt approached the table. "I love you," he said to Helou, in Arabic. "I just want to exchange mobile numbers. I promise I won't abuse it."

To my surprise, Helou offered his number. "What's your name?" he asked the fan.

"My friends call me Stalin," he said. "Because I'm a killer." Stalin had broad shoulders, a long, unbroken eyebrow that stretched across his forehead, and a gold chain around his neck.

Helou gave a dismissive nod.

I asked him about Ossama Mohammed's second film, "Sacrifices." Helou plays a father who leaves Syria to fight in the 1973 war against Israel. When he returns home to his family, on a remote mountaintop, he is caked with mud. In a savagely ironic scene, he gathers the family to tell his story. The women are beating cotton bolls on the table, and a cow stands at the front door. Helou's character explains that he was nearly killed when he was buried by an explosion for three days. It took that long for his fellow-Arabs to get a bulldozer to dig him out. "There was no fuel left, it seems," the character says bitterly. Where was the Arabs' oil when it was needed? he wonders. He then pulls the male children aside and forces them to drink oil—ostensibly to toughen them up.

Helou said of his character, "The shock of being defeated makes him cruel. Embracing the illusion of authority makes him think he was victorious." But, as the film shows, the only legacy of violence is more violence. Helou's character eventually abuses power in the same way as the corrupt and incompetent state that sent him into the disastrous war.

Stalin suddenly returned to our table. "I have another phone," he said, pulling it out of a black leather bag strapped around his waist. "I want to give you the number. Very few people have this. I even take it with me on operations." He was making it clear that he was with the secret police.

"Is this the first time you've been here?" Helou asked him.

"No, I'm *always* here," Stalin said. "We have spoken before. Usually, I'm dressed in a military uniform, so perhaps you don't recognize me."

Stalin asked if Helou was a member of the Baath Party. Helou said he was not.

"You cannot *not* be a member," Stalin said angrily, grabbing Helou's hand. "This is a real Baathist handshake! I will pay your dues for you!"

Stalin noticed that I was taking notes on his conversation, and he denounced American and British aggression in Iraq, and the interference of human-rights activists in Syrian affairs. "We should be able to discipline the peasants without outside interference," he said. "I quote Aristotle to his student, Alexander the Great, who said that you should treat the Greek people as gentlemen and the people of the East as slaves."

Stalin left, and I asked Helou about

the baffling mixture of fan worship, academic pretense, and veiled threats. "He came to deliver a message," Helou said. "He's telling me to take it easy—to calm down." His left leg was jiggling furiously.

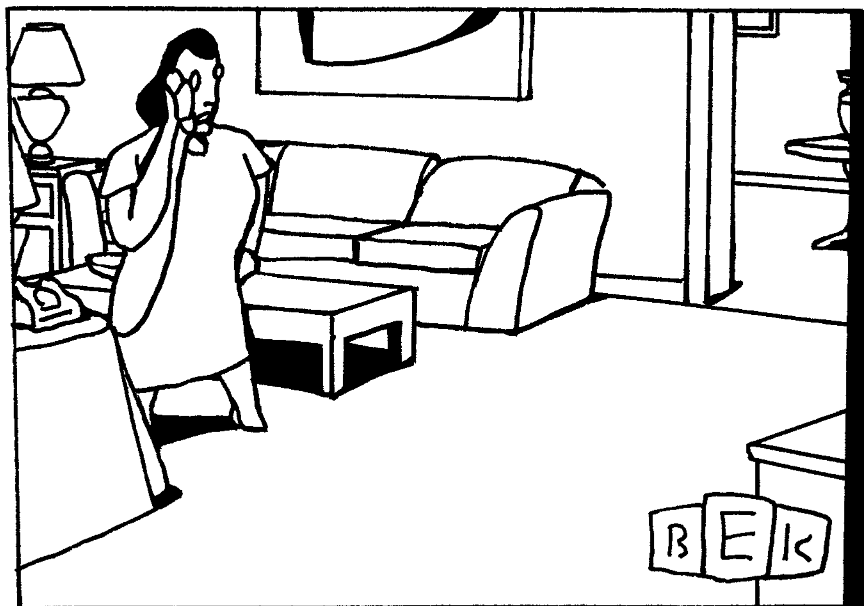
Minutes later, Stalin returned again, this time carrying a cup of coffee and a pack of Gitanes. He obviously intended to disrupt the interview. Bizarrely, he pulled yet another telephone from a jacket pocket. "This is my most private number," he said to Helou. He pointed to an arrow on the phone's screen, beside Helou's mobile number. "This arrow goes *through* you," he said, laughing. He squeezed in next to Helou, who had become quiet.

"Do you work for the government?" I asked Stalin.

"Of course—that's why I'm talking to you," he said, switching to English. He added that he was also a journalist for a pro-government magazine and that he loved movies—"*Syrian* movies," he said. "I love the movies that are produced by the National Film Organization and the movies made by this man, regardless of the fact that he is not obedient."

Stalin took Helou's hand once more. "I feel the need to beat someone," he said, laughing into Helou's shoulder. "May I beat you?"

I could see that Helou was ready to get out of there. "Welcome to Syria," Stalin said as we left.



"He's in the other room, grumbling about the culture."

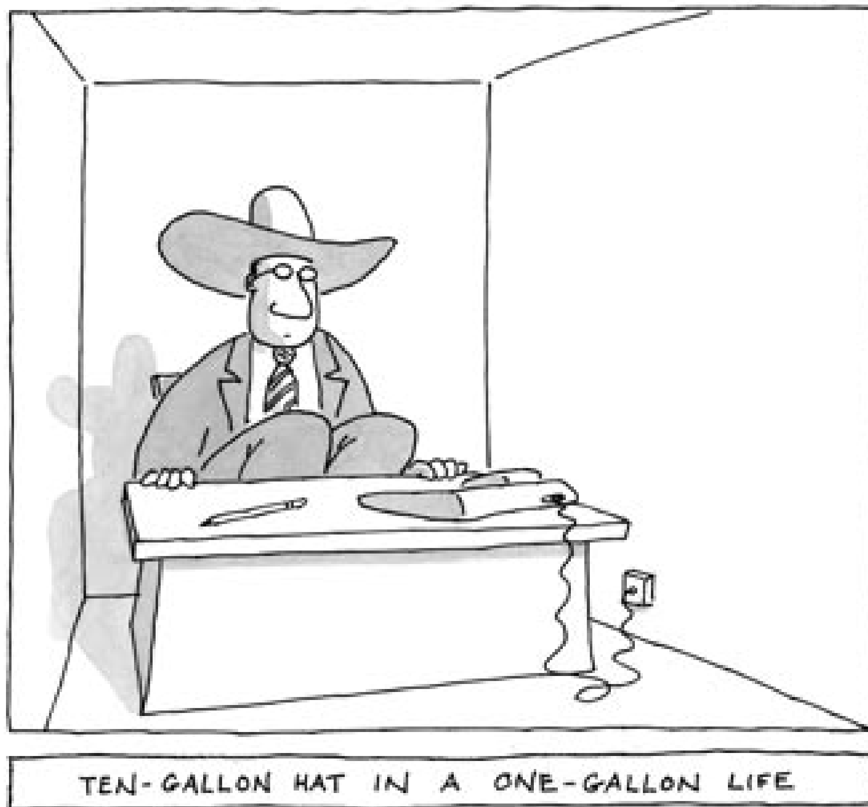
"Syria is a dictatorship, but it would be a mistake to understand us as a totalitarian society," Omar Amiralay, the documentarian, explained. "For instance, the National Film Organization has made forty-five features, but there is not one propaganda film in the modest history of Syrian cinema." It's true that Syrian films tend to be critical of the regime, but the nature of the protest is often indirect, like the projection system of the Damascus Cinema Club. I thought about Mohammed Malas's mournful "Dreams of the City" (1983), in which a young boy whose father has just died searches for a role model in his Damascus neighborhood but finds only corruption; and Abdullatif Abdulhamid's "Nights of the Jackals" (1989), an angry account of the death of traditional rural life. These films show a society that is, in Amiralay's words, "completely ruined."

The most brazenly subversive film that the National Film Organization has produced is "Stars in Broad Daylight," Mohammed's 1988 dark comedy about the family autocrat. I asked Mohammed how the movie came to be made. "Dictatorship is not like this monolith where everyone is the same," he explained. "No. Inside, you find a lot of people want to support you. 'Stars' wouldn't exist without three or four Syrian cinematographers who read the script on behalf of the National Film Organization." At the time, the government wanted to film an innocuous script by a different director, but the cinematographers had repeatedly rejected it. Finally, they made a deal, Mohammed recalled. "They said, 'We will give you this film if you give us 'Stars.' "

While Mohammed was working on the script, his brother Ali, an electrical engineer, was imprisoned, after government officials tricked him by inviting him and several university professors to share their views on reform. According to Mohammed, the authorities threatened to send Ali from a prison in Damascus to one in Palmyra, which has a reputation as a torture chamber, if Mohammed did not tone down his script. Mohammed refused to make any changes. "My relationship with my brother is like this: To salute him, I will make *my* movie. That is how I support him!" Ali was released after four and a half years, just before Mohammed began shooting.

During the filming, crew members began to get scared. "The game was to make love with the fear," Mohammed said. "It was 'Yes, let's put Hafez al-Assad *inside* my movie.' " He cast his Moscow schoolmate Abdullatif Abdulhamid in the lead role, largely because of his unmistakable resemblance to Assad. In a satirical sequence that pointedly conjures both the secret police and Marlon Brando in "The Wild One," the Assad figure and his brothers, wearing aviator sunglasses, ride through town on motorcycles. The vicious protagonist also reminded me of Stalin, the man in the café. Before I went to Damascus, the relationships of the characters in Syrian films had seemed to me full of unmotivated cruelty, but now they were beginning to make sense.

I asked Mohammed how he got away with making such a defiant film. "When you live in a garden of corruption, you learn the skills of bluffing," he said. "Some of my colleagues came and said, 'If this is not a piece of great art, you are going to be fucked.' When I was shooting, I forgot about this, but one day, when I was stuck in traffic, I



TEN-GALLON HAT IN A ONE-GALLON LIFE

thought, My God! What am I doing?" He thought that he might be jailed when he submitted the final cut. To his surprise, he was not. But his movie was put in cold storage.

It took Mohammed fourteen years to make his second project, "Sacrifices," which portrays the breakdown of social relations under dictatorship. "It is the story of Syria," he told me. "A huge quantity of time has been lost by holding on to illusions—the illusions of heroism, religion, Arab nationalism—and by not dealing with the Other. The Other is not Israel. It is inside our homes. It is inside everybody." He decided to make a movie that was more introspective and metaphorical than "Stars in Broad Daylight" but just as daring. One boy in the movie, he told me, represents his loving side; another represents his tyrannical side. "It's easy to insult the dictator," he told me. "It's much more difficult to find the dictator inside yourself."

When the script was completed, Mohammed submitted it to the National Film Organization. The scenario, about a dying man with a large family whose members are all competing for his blessing, was lyrical but obscure, and laden with references that government officials found both mysterious and dangerous. What, they demanded, was the meaning of the child who places birds inside bottles? Or the baby who floats, like Moses, down a Syrian river in his bassinet?

The film ends with a shot of a giant tree, just after the boy who represents Mohammed's loving self crawls into a casket. "The tree is positive, right?" a member of the National Film Organization asked him. "It's the homeland, right?"

"No," Mohammed said. "The tree is the tree."

He certainly didn't make it easy for himself. "You want to know my opinion about Syrian politics?" Mohammed recalls saying. "Is it democracy? Absolutely not. Is it dictatorship? Yes. But if you want this country to have a democracy after a hundred years, then this is our work together right now. So don't shit on my film."

One scene, in particular, troubled the director of the National Film Organization. Three boys are taught how to slaughter a cow while reciting verses from the Koran. "All the West is attacking us because, for them, we are killers and extremists," the director told Mohammed. "You don't want to say that." He asked Mohammed to cut the scene.

Mohammed refused, claiming that violence was an essential part of the culture. "You can't be a man unless you learn to kill," he declared. The scene represents the initiation of a new generation into the pathologies of Syrian life.

The men were at an impasse. Mohammed finally said, "I know a secret about you. When you were young, you jumped from one building to another to meet your girlfriend."

According to Mohammed, the bureaucrat was astonished. "How do you know this?" he asked.

"Ask the man who jumped what he thinks. Does he like the script?"

"It's amazingly beautiful."

"Please, follow *yourself*. Don't forget who you are."

"Go!" the director of the National Film Organization said. "Do it!"

Four years later, when "Sacrifices" was finally completed, a government committee, which included Baath Party officials, demanded considerable cuts. Mohammed declined, even though he knew that the film would therefore not be shown in Syria.

Mohammed's brother Ali happened to wander into the Rawda Café while we were talking. I recognized him—a white-haired man with kind green eyes—because he appears in "Sacrifices." In a startling scene, a pubescent boy is tied to a post after violating the fast during Ramadan. A Koran is tied into the knot of the rope. Ali enters and unties the rope. The image is deeply personal: Mohammed had told me that Ali was the first in his family to deny the authority of religion.

"When I did that scene, Ossama took me aside and asked me to push my anger," Ali said. "So I told him a story. When I was in prison, someone came to take a thirteen-year-old boy to Palmyra prison. He was terrified. He held on to me and pleaded not to let them take him away. This shot is for that boy."

"Sacrifices" received enthusiastic reviews at its première, at the 2002 Cannes

Film Festival, although some viewers were put off by Mohammed's elliptical storytelling. Indeed, when I first saw "Sacrifices," the references seemed so personal that I wondered if this is what happens when a director no longer expects to have an audience—he makes a film that is entirely for himself. Even Syrian intellectuals who have obtained the film on the underground DVD circuit were puzzled by some of the scenes, like the opening shot, which shows a naked boy being lowered into a cave to fetch a chicken, or the sequence in which a boy's pants burst into flames.

Mohammed does not see the hermetic qualities of "Sacrifices" as a weakness. "The kitchen of cinema here is full of poisonous materials," he told me. "But we are lucky as filmmakers to work in this kitchen. Because there is no audience, at least we don't have to worry about the censorship imposed by commercialism." He paused, then said, "Even if there *were* an audience, I would not change my ways."

In 1992, Omar Amiralay, after making eight films in France, came back to Syria. "I was fed up with Paris," he said, and he sensed that he could go home without being arrested. Also, he had fallen in love with a Damascene woman. "It was a sentimental return," he said.

But Amiralay had a score to settle, too. As a young documentarian, he had been given the chance to make a movie about the damming of the Euphrates River. The result, "Film-Essay on the Euphrates Dam" (1970), was heavily influenced by Soviet documentaries, with a reverent approach to the mighty instruments of labor. He now sees it as a naïvely Marxist work—"a hymn to the crane" is how he refers to it now—that is shamefully uncritical of the Baathist regime. In 2003, he returned to the dam region. "I wanted to make a film of fifteen shots, which are the fifteen reasons I hate the Baath Party. The last reason was that I hate myself, for having been obliged to make a film for them. They spoiled forty years of my life."

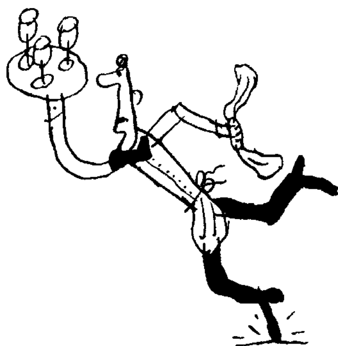
While doing research for the new documentary, "A Flood in Baath Country," Amiralay came to believe that the real reason the regime constructed the dam creating Lake Assad, as the massive reservoir is called, was not to generate hydroelectric power but to protect itself against the remote possibility that Turkey, Syria's northern neighbor, might choke off Syria's water supply in a hostile political gesture. As a consequence, Amiralay said, thousands of farmers were displaced, and archeologically important villages were drowned. "The thing that angered me the most is that I learned that this was the place where human beings became farmers for the first time, and left the hunting-and-gathering stage, eleven thousand years before Christ."

"Flood" begins with a bitter voice-over. Amiralay says, "In 1970, I was a firm advocate of the modernization of my homeland, Syria, so much so that I dedicated my first film to the building of a dam in the Euphrates River, the pride and joy of the Baath Party then in power. Today, I regret this error of my youth."

"For me, that first film is a deep wound in my heart," Amiralay told me. "I was able to make a career outside of my homeland. I don't regret it, but if they had given me the chance to live in Syria maybe I and my colleagues could have created a better country." The rueful "Flood" is a skillful and mature attack on a regime that has destroyed the people as willfully as it ruined the land.

I asked if "Flood" had ever been shown in Syria. Amiralay shook his head. "But when I finished I decided to give it to some film pirates," he explained. "Two months later, everybody in Damascus had seen it. It was a digital flood."

In April, 2000, the filmmaker Nabil Maleh started the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society, along with a small group of lawyers and intellectuals. Decades earlier, Maleh had directed some of Syria's most insurrectionary movies, including "The Leopard" (1972), a historical film about a revolt against an earlier Syrian regime. Maleh, who is seventy, is old enough to recall Syria in the nineteen-fifties, when it had a vigorous press and numerous political parties, as well as a vibrant civic life.



Once the movement got going, allied committees began springing up all over Syria. Hafez al-Assad died that June, which increased expectations that Syria might finally open up. In September, ninety-nine prominent Syrians, including fifteen filmmakers, signed a petition calling for an end to the restrictions on freedom of assembly, opinion, and the press; a general amnesty for all political prisoners; and a decree allowing political exiles abroad to return. The regime responded by releasing six hundred political prisoners.

In January, 2001, more than a thousand prominent Syrians, some of them living in exile, signed a broader and more daring petition, called the Basic Document, which had been drafted by Maleh's committee. The Basic Document called for an end to Baath Party domination. "Immediately came the crash," Maleh recalled. Bashar al-Assad warned that the advocates of greater openness were outsiders and were undermining the stability of the country. He declared that all social, political, and cultural gatherings had to be approved in advance. A few months later, ten signatories of the Basic Document were imprisoned for "attempting to change the constitution by illegal means." (Some of them remain in prison, in solitary confinement.) Officials told Maleh that he would never be able to make films again. The government effectively smothered the reform movement, even as it maintained the appearance of liberalizing by releasing elderly political prisoners and allowing the publication of new journals with minimal political content. "The development of civil-society institutions must come at a later stage," Bashar said in an interview with the pan-Arabic newspaper *Al Sharq al-Awsat*.

"We lost the war without ever fighting it," Maleh admitted one evening at dinner in an old house in the Christian quarter of Damascus, now a lovely but generally empty restaurant. I had suggested that political opposition in Damascus often seemed more gestural than

real, and that making movies no one could see was therefore a characteristic expression of Syrian dissent. Perhaps the society was so tamed by the regime that no more could be expected of it; but it was also possible that the regime was in part the political expression of a brutal and authoritarian culture.

Maleh had told me about an incident in his childhood, when he was seven years old. "I was with my family in a public park in Damascus," he recalled. "I wanted to use the swing. There were some children already playing there, and they were guarded by a soldier, probably a driver for some big shot. I don't know what I did to provoke it, but the soldier slapped me, knocking me four metres away. I picked up a clod of dirt, threw it at the soldier, and ran away. From that moment, all my life has been connected with a hatred of the uniform and of authority."

This anger was palpable in Maleh's films, most poignantly in "The Extras" (1993), in which two lovers meet at a friend's apartment for an assignation. They suppose that they have finally shut out the world that has prevented them from consummating their relationship, but fear prevents them from enjoying their moment alone. The film gets its title from the male character, who plays bit parts in theatrical productions, underscoring Maleh's belief that "we are all extras in this society." The real world intrudes when the secret police enter the apartment, supposedly concerned about a blind musician who lives next door. The man tries to prevent the musician's arrest and, in a reverie, imagines dispatching the police with a few judo moves, but his fantasy is broken by a hard slap that knocks him to the floor. He is humiliated and powerless in front of his lover—a devastating turning point in their relationship. "They enter the apartment as lovers," Maleh told me. "They leave as strangers."

Maleh confided to me that he had once been beaten by the police, after a public protest. "I was taken to prison for a day or two and slapped around," he said. "It was part of the fun of the times."

I thought of other scenes in Syrian cinema in which physical abuse plays a significant role—for example, in "Stars," a character is made permanently deaf by a blow from his father. These scenes, I knew, reflected the filmmakers' experiences. When I asked them about the abuse, however, their responses surprised me. Abdulhamid, whose films often feature punitive fathers, told me about going to see "Hercules" when he was a boy. Afterward, he ran into his family's wheat field with a stick, engaging in mock battle. When he damaged a few stalks, he said, with a smile, "my father beat me." Amiralay, whose father died when he was five, said, "I was beaten only by the slippers of my mother, and for this I am grateful. Such beatings awakened me."

I went to dinner one night in a restaurant with some Syrian artists, and I brought up the subject of physical abuse. "It's common," the middle-aged woman across from me acknowledged. "But this happens everywhere." She added, "For me, it was a positive experience."

"What do you mean?"

"I was twenty-six years old," she recalled. "At first, I was hurt. I was living just to please others—for example, my ex-husband and his family. Then I realized that a word from your mouth can make the difference between survival and destruction." She was staring at me; her shining brown eyes seemed strangely untroubled.

"A beating did this for you?"

She nodded. "It was like a revolution. It was like you are not living anymore to please others. You suddenly become very brave. I was one step from death, but I was thinking of my children, and I was determined to survive. It was positive for me. This is when I decided to be a creative person."

"So your ex-husband hit you?"

"No," she said quietly, so the other guests wouldn't hear. She took my notepad and wrote, "Raped by the government."

Later, I asked Maleh if Syrian society had always been so abusive. "No," he said. "Violence became a part of the daily practice in the last forty years." The Baathist throttling of democratic expression, he believed, replicated itself in the relationships between authority figures and people without power—women, children, and the poor.

Damascenes like to think of themselves as a pragmatic race of merchants who have survived millennia of repressive governments. They believe that they are superior to their Iraqi neighbors, whom they see as defiant and bloody-minded. "When the Americans destroyed Baghdad, in 2003, it was the twenty-fourth time in history this has happened," Ibrahim Hamidi, the *Al Hayat* bureau chief, told me. "Since the beginning of civilization, Damascus has never been destroyed." Amiralay recalled that an archeologist friend once sent him an e-mail with an image of a sheared-off cliff face, the strata of geological time clearly exposed. "You see this line?" the archeologist said, indicating a dark ribbon about ten centimetres in width. "It is eight thousand years of history." The whole history of Syria, Amiralay said, had been exposed to view. "I think the Baath period will be only a fraction of a millimetre on that scale," he said.

I asked him if, in that long history, there was ever a moment when the people of Syria had lived free and happy lives.

"I don't care," Amiralay said, testily. "It's a beautiful image."

Although the filmmakers often talked about freedom, they revealed a perverse desire to romanticize the artistic constraints of dictatorship. "The most beautiful Soviet films were produced in the era of Stalin," Abdulhamid told me. "When the Soviet Union collapsed and suddenly you could say whatever you wanted, the Russians began producing the most trivial films. Nobody should be forbidden to say what he wants, but it is a phenomenon that dazzles me: when you're suppressed, you *think* better."

The example that haunts Abdulhamid and many other Syrian filmmakers is Iran, where artists such as Abbas Kiarostami work under even more restraints than the Syrians. "They have to work within this box, but they show their films all over the world," he marvelled. Hatem Ali, a prominent television director, has studied Iranian films closely. "The fact that they have succeeded tells us a lot," he says. He gave the example of a scene in a film by

Mohsen Makhmalbaf, depicting an old woman who lives with her son. "She is in a wheelchair, and her hair is gray and unkempt," he said. "All the windows are covered, and somehow this film is talking about the isolation of Iran. The surprise comes when you learn that this actress is not a woman—it's a man. My makeup artist showed me all the photographs of how it was accomplished. In Iran, it is not acceptable for an actress to show her hair, but it would not be realistic for this elderly woman to appear in her house in *hijab*. So the director used a man." The lesson he drew from this was: "It is the art that is important, not the censorship."

"The Arab cinema has few masterpieces—no more than ten," Omar Amiralay pronounced one afternoon over cappuccino. Among them he included two Egyptian films, "Cairo Central Station," by Youssef Chahine, and "Fools' Alley," by Tewfik Saleh. Both films, he observed, were the directors' first major efforts. "It is a syndrome in Arab cinema that directors who make a remarkable first film rarely succeed in making another," he said. There were no Syrian films in his pantheon.

I asked where he placed his friend Ossama Mohammed. "Ossama is an exception," Amiralay said. "But he hasn't had the liberty to make an accomplished film, and, of course, he suffers from a lack of opportunity and experience." Syrian films have the potential to be great films, he continued, "but they lack the dimension of unity—the compact structure, the purposeful style, the visual sensibility. Many of the actors are not sufficiently mature or experienced. I always feel there is something wrong, as if they were ordinary people who were simulating acting. And, finally, the narration. We are so obsessed by daily reality that scriptwriters don't have the courage to invent new realities from their own imaginations. Because of this, I think they are making bad documentaries and passing them off as fiction."

Amiralay hopes to establish a school of cinema in the Middle East. He is working in conjunction with a European film institute. "It will be an academy that will have a three-year program with different specializations—photography, editing, directing, scriptwriting," he said. He said that his dream is to bring the institute to Damascus, if political circumstances permit. "We have until 2008 to decide about our location," he said. It was one of the first notes of optimism I had heard since arriving in Syria.

One evening, I went to the Old City with a Syrian cameraman, Samer al-Zayat, for a drink at Café Mar Mar, in a sixteenth-century building with stone walls and twenty-foot ceilings. We walked into a roomful of upturned faces illuminated by the familiar flickering light of a movie. I had stumbled upon the latest incarnation of the Damascus Cinema Club. I ordered popcorn and a Martini (it's a very congenial club) and watched "Big Fish." In attendance were many of Syria's film and television stars, who apparently have enough influence to keep the underground operation alive. "This is the only venue left for new artistic movies," Zayat told me. "They advertise by S.M.S. messages on the telephones, and show films every Monday night. Last week, we watched 'Munich.' " Unlike the old days of the cinema club, however, the audience departed quietly when the film was over.

The week after I left Syria, a government-approved newspaper announced that, the following day, Ossama Mohammed's "Sacrifices" would be given its first public showing, in Homs, a provincial town in central Syria. The suddenness of the announcement seemed to be connected to the government's awareness of this article. Mohammed raced to Homs, only to discover that his film was not being shown after all; instead, a Baathist youth rally was under way. Though he knew that he wouldn't change the situation, he acted out the role of the fearless dissident. "I shouted and made a scene," Mohammed told me. "I said I would call the governor. I really played the game." ♦

"Happiness is not readily transmittable from bluebirds to humans."