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Shooting Under Fire: Filmmaking and the Aesthetics of Resistance

AN INTERVIEW WITH OMAR ROBERT
HAMILTON

Walid
El Hamamsy

The Egyptian revolution of January 2011 has been seen by many as a youth revolution. Though various strata of

Egyptian society have participated in and continue to support the revolution, it is really the youth who occupy centre stage in Egypt's revolutionary picture. And anyone who lives in Cairo or has visited it since January 2011 will readily tell you that it is indeed the young who are carving the new future of democracy that Egyptians aspire to, despite the many pitfalls and setbacks experienced over the last two years or so. Egypt's youth – with their new dreams, media, values and politics of social exchange and interaction – are contributing to Egypt's 'cultural revolution', sustaining it on a day-to-day basis, and leaving their imprint on the blueprint of freedom and social justice that is being written as you read this. This interview zooms in on one of the faces of the revolution, Omar Robert Hamilton, British-Egyptian filmmaker and one of the founding members of the Mosireen (literally meaning 'insisting') initiative and the Tahrir Cinema project. The interview was conducted by email in March 2012.

Walid El Hamamsy From a very early age you knew that you wanted to be in filmmaking. Yet you decided to study literature before pursuing this career. What does filmmaking mean to you and why was the start delayed/interrupted by the study of literature? I am also interested in what you have to say about the intersections between literature and film.

Omar Robert Hamilton Filmmaking was always attractive because it's the medium that gives you the most varied tools to work with. Everything is at your disposal: photography,

poetry, music, fiction, fashion, architecture. I knew from very early on that that was where I was headed.

But I thought it was important to do some reading first. Partly because I thought it was important to have a grasp of the major works before jumping in and trying to start writing, partly to get a broader understanding of history than you're given at school. And partly because of the safety-net mentality they drill into you in schools in England — filmmaking is a pipe dream, it's a 'tough industry' to crack etc. Schools are designed to get you into a stable, reliable job. Going to university was partly an accommodation of that institutional fear that they might produce someone who doesn't fit neatly into the national schema (lawyer, banker, advertiser, soldier).

It was useful, though. I learned that I don't want to tell stories just for their own sake; that a story without a political foundation is entertainment and not art. So the challenge, I think, is telling a compelling story that carries a strong message and a call to action of some kind. The challenge is in creating plots that can have strong, realistic, politically driven scenarios without being slow or dull or worthy. Some people manage it – Greengrass, Cuarón, Abu Ass3ad,¹ Pontecorvo – but most fail. Which is bizarre, because the world is full of thrilling, important stories, yet nearly all of the American films that have been made for the last twenty years are either about superheroes, sport or sex.

What makes it even stranger is that if there's one thing that film needs in order to exist, it's reality. To make a film you need to be able to film something. Yet, very little of what actually reaches the cinemas has any relationship to reality. Yes, they film living organisms, but that's pretty much the end of it.

There are various reasons for this. If the audience thinks cinema is about spectacle and you are the only one who can afford to create spectacle, then you have no competition. If the

audience thinks cinema is about spectacle, then you don't have to waste your time and money with writers and plots; you just do what the computer tells you. And so on.

As we all know, there is a massive divide between what mainstream industry filmmakers do and what independent filmmakers do. And, while some people would discount the mainstream and dismiss it as simply entertainment, those are the films that dominate ninety-nine per cent of what people watch and so have to be considered very seriously.

On the independent filmmaking side, reality has to be your friend, not your enemy. Because you are constantly working against it – against time, daylight, money, other people – you have to need it. You have to film what's in front of you, you have to pull your story out of the world around you.

Literature is almost the exact opposite. You build the story in your mind, and then put it out into the world. The challenge is getting it on to paper. The only thing you have to beat is yourself.

WH In 1892, Rudyard Kipling wrote his famous line 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet' – his verdict on the cultural gap separating the British Empire from its Indian colonies – a line much analysed, revised and criticised in light of postcolonial theory because of its essentialist ideology. You seem a flesh-and-blood embodiment of the twain meeting. Growing up in the UK with an Egyptian mother and a British father, what did identity mean to you? How was your understanding of your 'Egyptianness' reshaped by particular lived experiences?

ORH I've never really had a sense of identity that is tied to a nation or national culture — if there is such a thing. I feel connected to people, places, events, ideas. Patriotism is a totally alien feeling to me. I really don't buy into identity politics and would have to spend a very long time breaking it all down.

WH In 2010, you completed your first fiction short, *Maydoun*, shot between Cairo and London, starring Khalid Abdalla and co-written with Ahdaf Soueif. Your preparation for your next film, *Though I Know the River is Dry*, scheduled to be shot in Palestine in 2011, was interrupted by the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and your involvement with other projects related to the revolution. How do you feel about the making and reception of *Maydoun* and where does its intriguing title come from? How does it resemble or differ from *Though I Know the River is Dry*? And what informs your decisions regarding subject matter and shooting location when you embark on a new project?

ORH I feel fond of *Maydoun*, though it was very much a learning-experience film, as shorts are meant to be — it's named after the village that Khalid's character travels to at the end and is also the name of the pyramid there, which is a much less famous one than the big three in Giza. There's a lot in there that I'm pleased with, but I'll do many things differently in the future. In hindsight I realise *Maydoun* wasn't

written as a film, but as a short story. The script was hugely weighted towards text, rather than being a blueprint to build a visual out of.

It was also intended as a prequel to Ahdaf Soueif's (my mother) next novel. Khalid's character was to play a major part, and this was the beginning of his move into Egyptian life. But that novel's still not finished, so the ending perhaps feels incomplete. Which isn't a major problem for me, but is something that lots of people have found unsatisfying. People like their narratives to end. And it's fine to challenge that, but *Maydoun* got caught in the middle — it didn't explicitly *not* have an ending, nor did it make it clear it was just a beginning.

River will be different; when you read the script you know you are only seeing the middle point of the process, that it won't be complete until it's filmed. Which is exciting.

In terms of how the decisions get made, I think there is a mixture of idealism and pragmatism behind them all. On the one hand, one wants to be making work that ultimately makes a useful contribution to the world. Perhaps by enabling an empathetic response from the audience to a situation they haven't got emotional access to. Or by highlighting and personalising an issue that is otherwise abstract.

But you have to be practical. So you write scenes around locations you have access to, you write the people you know into parts of your characters — the way they speak, how their mood changes; you utilise the world around you as much as you can.

WH Despite your debut with a fiction film, many know you because of your documentary project: Tahrir Cinema² and involvement with Mosireen³ — a group of citizen journalists collecting archival footage from the revolution. Yet those who have followed your work closely know that your involvement with Mosireen is not without precedent, that you are heavily involved as Producer with the Palestine Festival of Literature.⁴ What instigated your interest in Palestine and Egypt? And how do you see the connection between art and activism/ resistance — two separate and irreconcilable terrains for many?

ORH I accompanied my mother to Palestine when I was nineteen. I remember thinking, as I was packing, that I had no idea what to expect, I didn't know if I was heading into a war zone or not. I read the news, had a sense of the political situation but, as I tried to imagine daily life, I was totally unable to. The fact that day-to-day life was so unrepresented struck me very powerfully. You can have a sense of the broad injustice of what's happening in Palestine, but it's very hard to *feel* it through the news. From the daily humiliations of checkpoints, to the panic of being fired at, to the utter despair in al-Khalil/Hebron. The transmission of experience isn't something the news is in the business of doing — it is the job of artists, of filmmakers.

And it's something we try to do with PalFest. One of the core ideas was to take international authors to see and live for themselves the reality of life in Palestine. These are people

with the skills to capture and recreate experiences, and with audiences keen to receive them. So it's part of a push to add depth to the representations of Palestinian life.

Art and activism are inextricably entwined — it's just a question of degrees of transparency. At one end of the spectrum you have things like PalFest, Ken Loach, Public Enemy or Ai Wei Wei — that are very stately making public, political acts. At the other end you have Hollywood films, pop music, musical theatre, advertising — they present themselves as apolitical but are very heavily invested in the status quo and are actively working to maintain it.

They are both types of activism. One is trying to make people question things, to act. The other is trying to make them compliant, to pacify them.

Take *The Dark Knight*, for example. It's a brilliant film. But it is also a wholehearted endorsement of the Patriot Act, of extrajudicial killing and torture. Or the well-documented 24 effect, which has seen a generation of US military cadets think it's OK to use torture as a first resort in interrogation (like the police in Egypt) — to the point that the Dean of the US Military Academy flew to Los Angeles to meet the producers and ask them to include more legal interrogation techniques in their scripts. 24's producer calls himself a 'right-wing nut job', has donated money to Rick Santorum's campaign and owns an American flag that flew over Baghdad in 2003. The guy has an agenda — it's militaristic, it's violent, it's isolationist, it's racist. So him pumping money into a TV show that shows a heroic American justified in torturing and killing every foreigner who crosses his path has just as much of a political agenda as a socialist documentarian.

WH One of your goals in Mosireen is to set up a network of filmmakers which crosses the boundaries of Cairo. I believe it is out of this goal that your collaboration with similar initiatives like Askar Kazeboon⁵ was born. Would you like to detail each of the projects you are involved in — Mosireen, Tahrir Cinema and Kazeboon — and the degree of your involvement in each?

ORH OK. Well, Tahrir Cinema was probably the starting point for me. I was in Palestine in June, preparing to shoot *Though I*

Know the River is Dry. My visa ran out and I decided to come back to Egypt for three days to renew it. The day after I arrived was 28 June and a huge battle with the police broke out down Mohamed Mahmoud Street. Then the July sit-in started up . . . I kept postponing my flight until eventually we decided to postpone the film to 2012.

So we found ourselves at a sit-in — which was very hot and tiring. So me and a few others set up a screen in the corner of the square and began showing clips from the archive of revolutionary material that was being collected at Mosireen. We kept that going nearly every night through July, bringing the equipment in and out every day, stealing electricity from different lampposts; basically building a new cinema every night. We'd show different stuff every night, have guest curators or filmmakers show what they'd shot, show films or footage that people came up and gave us. And we used it as a swapping point for material — people would take footage from us and contribute whatever they had to the growing archive.

So I got pretty involved with Mosireen over that month and joined it officially as an organising member. We didn't actually start making our own films until Maspero happened — the night the Army killed twenty-eight peaceful protestors outside the state television building that kind of jolted us into action — and we've released ninety-seven more films since then.

We ran Tahrir Cinema a few times more at the November sit-in and then Kazeboon started up. Mosireen helped Kazeboon get started, and then it took off on its own very quickly. The great success of Kazeboon, of course, is that it is totally decentralised and people all over the country are just picking up projectors and doing it themselves. Our role within that now is to provide the material — to shoot the footage, to make the films, to make them accessible. So we store high-res versions of all our films on Vimeo and they're available for anyone to download and screen.

WH I am impressed by the degree of democracy and teamwork ethics you observe as a group in Mosireen, particularly interesting in the context of the revolution, one of whose goals is precisely the achievement of such democracy. What do you have to say about that group dynamic that governs your work



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with other members of Mosireen? Who are some of the other people involved in the initiative whose contribution you would like to highlight?

ORH The collective organisation is at the heart of Mosireen. I think people in all areas of society are learning the lessons of the revolution and are taking them into their own lives — and for us that non-hierarchical open-source structure was central to the original success of the revolution and to its ability to sustain itself now. So we try to apply it to our work as much as possible.

In our film production, for example, everything is uncredited. We work interchangeably when needed. The number of people who contribute footage to a film can be anything from one to thirty. So you get a really dynamic working process. It's very challenging and can be very tiring, to be out filming all day and then — when you're not on the street — collecting, collating and editing footage. But we've had some really important results. And, crucially, having that open structure means anyone can join in at any time, anyone can contribute. You could say that we have two unofficial rules: the footage all comes from *within* the revolution and we never use narration. We're not trying to present ourselves as a voice of 'authority' — we're just providing an angle from street level.

Regarding the other people, it's an incredibly interesting and dynamic group. Each person has a different specialty or skill, but everyone is dedicated and I think we're all very lucky to be working now, together, at such a historical crossroads.

WH Mosireen is interested in the decentralisation of production and training other less professional bodies, especially outside Cairo, to make their own videos and set up their own screenings. How successful have you been in implementing this goal? And how positive has the response been from people working in the provinces, for instance?

ORH We're actually right at the beginning of this process. We've run a series of workshops in Cairo already and hope to run training in five governorates this year. In Cairo, I think we've made some really useful connections and some of the people now regularly out filming had their introduction to filming through us.

We'll see how it goes outside Cairo. What we really hope is that, through a little technical assistance, we can have partner collectives across the country who are all providing coverage from their own cities. There are incredibly exciting things happening across Egypt, but the media is so Cairo-centric that they hardly get any coverage. But the revolution takes strength from seeing that people are insisting on change everywhere, so more stories need to get out.

WH Work such as that undertaken by Mosireen involves both physical and intellectual hazards in the making and screening of the videos. Clearly because of the violent nature of the footage, the journalist is often 'shooting' against shooting (rubber bullets, teargas etc), but also there's the threat of

ensorship by counter-/anti-revolution bodies — be that in the form of rumours spread about your allegiances and funding or actual physical attacks during the screenings. How do such threats impact on the continuity of your work and how have you tried to counter them as a team?

ORH I think we've been learning a little too slowly. Salma (Said) was shot three times by a policeman with a shotgun in February and is incredibly lucky not to have lost her sight — one of the pellets lodged in her face is four millimetres from her eye. Sherief (Gaber) was arrested last week for filming on the streets. We've been raided by the army and they took mine and another member's cameras. The physical hazards are almost countless, but they're no more than anyone else fighting out there has to face. And there's not much you can do about them; just wear a thick jacket, wear a gas mask and run away at the right moment.

In terms of rumours and all that, there are a couple of nasty Facebook pages that publish our photographs and the office address and tell people we're all homosexual Zionists or whatever. And obviously the army and the media are doing everything they can to back up this kind of hate speech, which is then also used by 'honourable citizens' — or *agents provocateurs* — in the street. Last week, for example, at the beginning of a march from Mostafa Mahmoud Mosque, a large man with a powerful voice gathered a crowd round him, shouting 'Look at those foreigners, those Israelis, those Americans.' He marched over to us, chanting 'The army, the people, one hand' and repeatedly shoved me in the face, yelling for us to leave. You could see no one else was quite willing to follow him into violence, but he had worked them up very quickly just by parroting the xenophobia being poured out of the state media.

Egypt is an incredibly homogenous country, with a fraught colonial past and an uncomfortably dependent relationship with modern tourism, so it's an easy card to play.

And countering this kind of aggression is everyone's responsibility. Because this is the kind of stuff that can filter through into all aspects of society, much as sexual harassment of women has done. So everyone needs to take a strong individual stand; it's not about defending us, it's about defending all of our right to work without fear.

WH One of the controversies surrounding the revolution is the contribution of social sites and digital media to its eruption. Many now complain that the revolutionary scene in Egypt is restricted to cyberspace, divorced from the reality of the street and the majority of laypeople with no access to such technologically advanced media. Now, Mosireen seems to combine these two forms of activism. You have a YouTube channel,⁶ a Facebook page⁷ and a Twitter account,⁸ yet you also conduct street screenings that often end up with the mobilisation of the masses and marches against the authorities. What's your take on these two kinds of activism and the potentials of collaboration between them?

ORH It's incredibly important to always remember that cyberspace should be thought of as a route to the physical, not an end in itself. Of course, something shocking or moving on the internet can lead to physical action — and that certainly happens all the time. But we also try to take our work into the streets, however that might be possible. All our films are available on our website to be downloaded on to mobile phones, we make cheap CDs packed with as many films as we can and, now that Kazeboon has sprung up, our work has been in reclaimed public spaces and seen all over the country.

So I think the charge of the revolution being restricted to cyberspace is unfair and feels very much like the accusation of those not involved, or the vocal minority that like to present themselves as the silent majority. The internet is a site of contest, it is a space for debate and argument and, crucially, the spread of information.

And though ours isn't a Facebook Revolution, we mustn't dismiss how powerful a tool the internet is. That, combined with mobile phones, are the major new weapons at our disposal. If the revolutions around the world are to succeed, it will be because we can communicate and adapt and evolve faster than the traditional forces in power.

WH Mosireen and similar projects are examples of participatory 'street art' and can be conceived alongside other initiatives like the slogan-chanting songs of Ramy Essam, mobilising music of the Eskenderella band and visual memory offered by graffiti art on walls all over Egypt. Where would you place your work on the youth culture map in relation to such projects? What are the prospects of development you envision for Mosireen and how can they be achieved? Do you see possibilities of future partnership and synergy with other like-minded initiatives that resort to different media than yours to achieve common goals?

ORH There are lots of social connections between the different groups and a lot of work already gets done together. A lot of the graffiti stencils get made at Mosireen, we've talked to Ramy Essam about making a music video for him, Eskenderella are coming to Gaza for PalFest 2012. And, alongside the arts scene, we are currently directly involved in making films in partnership with the blogs Cairoobserver and Shadow Ministry of Housing, No to Military Trials, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights and Human Rights Watch. So, yes, there are countless possibilities — and they are all tremendously exciting. We just need to waste less time — to sleep less.

Notes

- 1 Hany Abu Ass3ad has been spelled with the 3 in it, because the 3 is used now as an equivalent of the Arabic letter 'ayn, which it resembles and which has no equivalent in the Latin alphabet.
- 2 See <<http://www.cinerevolutionnow.com/2011/07/tahrir-cinema.html>>.
- 3 See <<http://mosireen.org>>.
- 4 See the Palfest website <http://www.palfest.org/The_Team.html>.
- 5 Lying Military, see the website <https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=324508710915922>.
- 6 See <<http://www.youtube.com/user/Mosireen/featured>>.
- 7 See <https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=324508710915922>.
- 8 See <<http://twitter.com/#!/mosireen>>.