

LES FILMS D'ICI & PROACTION FILM PRESENT
IN ASSOCIATION WITH ARTE FRANCE - LA LUCARNE



OFFICIAL SELECTION
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

SILVERED WATER

SYRIA SELF-PORTRAIT

A FILM BY
OSSAMA MOHAMMED & WIAM SIMAV BEDIRXAN

AN INTERVIEW WITH OSSAMA MOHAMMED

The Beginning of the Film, the Beginning of Cinema

I was convinced that I had to do this film. Actually, I felt “under siege” on a personal level. It was difficult for me to acknowledge that I was outside Syria and that people kept being killed over there – and as I was witnessing the number of victims rise steadily, I watched my people’s expressions and their plea for freedom. When I say “my people”, I’m talking about the fountain of beauty I really saw among the Syrian youth who started the revolution. So, again, I was going through a very dark, painful moment, asking myself at every turn, “What can I do for my people?” I began writing a few articles in the Arabic-speaking press, and I tried to achieve a creative, artistic language in talking about this particular time. But I would keep asking myself, “What more can I do?”

But what really set things off was the moment I saw the scene on YouTube where the teenager is arrested and tortured. This is my “primitive scene”. In this instance, the image serves as an archetype of violence, but also helps to spread violence. Actually, that scene found its way into the film and was one of the triggers of the Syrian revolution.

When I got the first message from Simav, in Homs, I was in Paris, and it was Christmas, and as I started reading her message, I found out that I was in fact reading high-end literature – a wonderful poem. This girl who was trying to make her first film was asking me, “If you were in my place, what would you do? Where would you begin?”

And then, there were all these online images proving the daily horror. Whether it’s YouTube material or anything else, it’s first and foremost “images” – people trying to express their inner feelings, people trying to survive and asking for help. And everything was shot by young Syrians.

For me, the history of cinema seemed to begin all over again in Syria. And what fascinated me was that I got the impression that the whole cinematic language, with its close-ups, wide-angle shots and tracking shots, was being reinvented. It was a moment of truth, a moment close to death, a moment of urgency that desperately needed to be expressed. Because when you start filming, you feel that you are more alive.

So when I got the message from Simav, and when she sent me some more images, I felt I had to start the film and that from those anonymous images, there was someone emerging. I told Simav, “You’ve saved me,” as I came out of this period of isolation.

Building the Film

All my life I've tried to protect and defend cinema, according to my notion of the medium. For me, it is a particular language, where images and sound can come up with a new take on life, on art and on language. Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, it's been a revolution of images. I've seen thousands and thousands of images. And it's like the dailies of one big film.

I believed that the images sent by Simav could tell a story. When she appeared in my life, I thought she was the embodiment of a new generation of filmmakers. What I like is when there are different levels of narratives, story upon story. I wanted to respect the people who shot those images as filmmakers, and that's why it's a film made by "thousands of Syrians". The moment I realized that their images were telling a story, I thought I was on the right track.

At the beginning, I rejected the use of voiceover. But as I became a part of this undertaking, of this community of dead poets that are behind the footage, I started accepting the notion of voiceover because it became a multi-layered story, and because I felt it was not explanatory.

Keeping an Open Mind

When I began the casting process for my latest feature film, *Sacrifices*, I placed an ad in Damascus to let people know that my door was open to professional and non professional actors for one month. I was willing to meet anyone who was willing to play in my film, because I thought it was crucial to keep my mind as open as possible. Much in the same way, when I decided to do *Silvered Water*, I embarked on an excruciating mission – but one I felt I had to embark on – to see everything, and not to go the easy way.

I worked with a young Syrian girl who was able to find the footage online very easily. Although she started out as an assistant, helping me with the material, I found out she had an amazing eye for the editing, and so she ended up being the editor of the film.

Gradually, we started to find connections between the images, and between the images and the subject matter of the film. It was a very long, difficult, yet fascinating search. But it gave me a keen insight into what was going on in my country. Then we started to organize the material and as the artistic connections between the images fell in place, the narrative emerged from this chaos.





Choosing the Right Shots

I realized that the material was so rich that I could come up with at least five films, with different cinematic languages, or that we could make a five-hour film. But I was very strict about searching for what matched my cinematic language, which was about not being too explanatory. This is what guided my artistic decisions, and sometimes it was very painful to cut out episodes.

Stupidly, I was obsessed with long shots. But I realized that I was destroying other people's choices by wanting the images to fit into this obsession for sequence shots. By the end of the editing process, I decided to put one scene back into the film. After two weeks, I put another one back. In fact, looking back, I realized that there were shots of young Syrians wondering how to film. Because, for them, their first time filming is also their first time claiming freedom.

I made another decision. I thought that I should keep the rest of the material for Simav. I have a dream that we'll meet one day in person and that we'll make another film with the rest of the footage. She's been filming for the past two years, and it's her way of staying alive. She sleeps with the camera by her side, and she wakes up with the camera by her side. Her camera is like a survival kit. When you're under siege, even the mere motion of the camera is evidence that something is moving, and that you're still alive. It's a valuable thing for the future.

The Aesthetic of Human Life

I didn't know at the beginning that the images would be so horrible and reveal so many killings. But you cannot tell this story without showing this. First, for the truth itself: there are dead bodies in the street. Second, because some people were willing to sacrifice their lives to save dead bodies and put them in a decent grave, which is a way to save the aesthetic of human life. It is about defending human rights, even when human beings are dead.

A dead body itself doesn't say anything. So you have to reconnect it to the movement of time and life. It was a real challenge to reach the inner feelings of the victim and of the person shooting. It changed the level of understanding. And the dialogue between Simav and me also heightened the level of understanding and of the narrative. For me, it has to do with the aesthetic of tragedy, because whenever young people who have a lot to give, and who can be a force in the future, are killed, tragedy sets in.

The Importance of Music

What I found fascinating was that there is music in a variety of sounds, including the gunshots, the sound of soldiers' feet hitting the ground, Facebook chat sounds and the humming of the woman at the beginning of the film. Gradually, this developed into a multi-layered chant, which is yet another level of narrative.

I decided that the woman humming was Simav's voice. I was sure that Simav was watching the same sequence, and that she was asking herself the same questions, even though we didn't know each other then. When Simav was not around, the music was her presence inhabiting the images. When you see her writing on the building, you can't help feeling that the humming is Simav's voice. The music says a lot about her, about her isolation, about her deciding to be alone but not to leave others alone.

Noma Omran, the singer-composer, constructed the film with us. We definitely worked together – I was building the rhythm of the film with her voice. She was both a character in and a contributor to the film. The vocal is like a thread. So Norma, just like the editor, is one of the filmmakers of the film.

Chaplin as Savior

We, the Syrian filmmakers, have always wanted to include cinema in the school syllabus for young children. And suddenly Simav, this wonderful lady, asked me one day to send her something to save our people's souls when a child was killed. And I sent her a Chaplin film. Later on, she told me that she had shown the film to children. It was a moment of pure joy to find out that Chaplin had uplifted them.

Toward the end of the film, the way the little boy Omar walks is reminiscent of Chaplin. He's all alone, his father was killed, but he invents dialogue with his father. He is the embodiment of the future of Syria. Like him, Simav is free – she defends freedom, and she also embodies the future of Syria. She makes no compromise with human rights. She's a metaphor of Syria. We're living a horrible tragedy, but within the horror, you discover the future of the country. I felt I was in front of a woman teaching a man how to build his life.



SILVERED WATER SYRIA SELF-PORTRAIT

FROM BE-SIEGED HOMS TO THE CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

The “Special Screenings” section of the Official Selection of Cannes Film Festival, will host the world premiere of the feature-length documentary film “Silvered Water”, by renowned Syrian filmmaker Ossama Mohammed (“Stars in Broad-Day Light” Directors’ Fortnight 1988, “Sacrifices” Certain Regards 2002), co-directed by Syrian new-comer Wiam Simav Bedirxan, whose previous documentary films were screened in the Arab region over the past three years, with alias names, to ensure her safety in Syria.

“Silvered Water” relates the story of a friendship, and a partnership, between its two makers, making them the film’s protagonists too. Mohammed, stuck in his Paris exile, because he received death threats following his demand of releasing political prisoners in Syria, in a panel in Cannes 2011; and Bedirxan, a Kurdish Syrian female filmmaker from the city of Homs, who ends up being the one and only single, independent and secular female inside the infamous siege of Homs, until the moment the film premieres in Cannes. The film builds an arch of the Syrian story over more than two years, from the viewpoint of those the film calls “The New Filmmakers”, from Dera’ to Douma, Lattakia, Banyas... until Homs, and its siege. It is the unique viewpoint of those young men and women who never studied cinema or had the chance to learn about it, but who found their tool of expression, out of necessity and under the harshest conditions, in the camera.

The film’s story unfolds with its two protagonists experience of the Syrian revolution and throughout the difficult time passing. Ossama in Paris, stuck to his laptop screen, trying to stay connected to Syria through the means possible, Facebook and YouTube. She reaches out to him, and a dialogue begins.

When she knew about the film’s selection for Cannes, Wiam wrote from be-sieged Homs:

“I cannot believe that the echoes of our pain are reaching the world only now, as story of Homs is probably approaching a tragic ending. I have no words left to say but I will dig a grave and I will bury my silence. Forgive me. Our film, the film of our Syria, will be my words, and I, from under all of this bombardement, will try to follow up as much as I can, if I lived longer. Behind your yearning I may hide from death... leave your hearts open”

SILVERED WATER

SYRIA SELF-PORTRAIT



OFFICIAL SELECTION
FESTIVAL DE CANNES
SPECIAL SCREENING

A FILM BY
OSSAMA MOHAMMED & WIAM SIMAV BEDIRXAN

SYNOPSIS

In Syria, everyday, YouTubers film then die; others kill then film. In Paris, driven by my inexhaustible love for Syria, I find that I can only film the sky and edit the footage posted on YouTube. From within the tension between my estrangement in France and the revolution, an encounter happened. A young Kurdish woman from Homs began to chat with me, asking: "If your camera were here, in Homs, what would you be filming?" *Silvered Water* is the story of that encounter.

LES FILMS D'ICI - PROACTION FILM - ARTE FRANCE, LA LUCARNE / FRANCE - SYRIA / 92' / HD / ARABIC / 2014 / DOCUMENTARY

CANNES SCREENINGS

THURSDAY 15/05 at 15:00 in BAZIN (PRESS)

FRIDAY 16/05 at 17:00 in 60^{ÈME} (OFFICIAL)

SATURDAY 17/05 at 11:30 in RIVIERA 2 (MARKET)

CREDITS

DIRECTORS & WRITERS OSSAMA MOHAMMED AND WIAM SIMAV BEDIRXAN
ORIGINAL MUSIC AND VOCAL NOMA OMRAN PHOTO WIAM SIMAV BEDIRXAN AND THOUSAND SYRIANS AND OSSAMA MOHAMMED
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EXECUTIVE PRODUCER LES FILMS D'ICI (SERGE LALOU, CAMILLE LAEMLÉ) EXECUTIVE PRODUCER PROACTION FILM (ORWA NYRABIA, DIANA EL JEIROUDI)
IN ASSOCIATION WITH ARTE FRANCE - LA LUCARNE COMMISSIONING EDITOR LUCIANO RIGOLINI
WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF CNC, PROCIREP / ANGOA, SUNDANCE AND ARAB FUND FOR ARTS AND CULTURES

INTERNATIONAL AND FRENCH PRESS

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