



LUXEMBOURG CITY FILM FESTIVAL

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THESSALONIKI
INTERNATIONAL
DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL

NEWCOMERS
COMPETITION 2023

TiDF25



OFFICIAL SELECTION 2023



A No Nation Films Production

5 SEASONS OF REVOLUTION

EDUCATIONAL MATERIAL

15-19 year olds

**5 SEASONS
OF REVOLUTION**

A Film by Lina

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PROLOGUE

CREDITS OF THE FILM



Title of the film: 5 Seasons of Revolution

Filmmaker: Lina

Year: 2023

Country: Germany, Syria

Cast: Lina, Susu, Rima, Malaz, and Bassel

Production: Diana El Jeiroudi

SHORT SYNOPSIS OF THE FILM

Compiled from years of video diaries and footage shot by young journalist Lina, *5 Seasons of Revolution* is a poignant portrait of friendship in times of war. Over a period of ten years, the personal fates and professional choices of a group of Syrian citizens become inextricably entangled with Syria's political and humanitarian crisis.

Using different techniques to conceal the identity of her protagonists, including her own, the filmmaker delivers a document wavering between thorough journalistic methodology and self-reflexive, personal documentary making.

A freelance video journalist chronicles an activist group during five years of the Syrian revolution.

LINA, BETWEEN DOCUMENTARY MAKER

AND WAR CORRESPONDENT

- *What is the difference between a documentary about the war and a televised report of the war?*
- *What does objectivity mean to you?*
- *Are there images from the film you consider typically journalistic, and others less so?*
- *Which were the moments where you felt Lina's personal point of view was most tangible?*
- *Documentary making and video journalism, are they close siblings or distant relatives? Try to list several adjectives to describe each.*
- *Where do journalism and documentary-making overlap?*

Lina's work probably fits neither one of those categories and both at the same time. She is reporting news, and has been active as a journalist from 2011 through 2016, talking to witnesses and collecting reports. Her camera has recorded other moments throughout that period, which were perhaps accidental recordings initially. Consciously edited together, these fragments become a tale of an emotional journey and provide access to a world of intimacy which otherwise would have remained a shared memory on a hard drive. Opting to use these recordings pushes the work forward and turns it into something else. By continuing to work on her images beyond their initial use as frontline coverage and transforming them into a documentary, Lina shares **a personal point of view**, a slice of her life and a reflection on friendship. These components wouldn't usually make the cut in a news studio.

Film editing requires the construction of a narrative yet the same narrative techniques have slipped into the newsrooms of the 24-hour news cycle as well. **Storytelling** can no longer be a differentiatial between video journalism and documentary making.

Here are three other criteria one could use to differentiate video journalism and documentary making, distilled from the film.

- **Notion of time**

Not only is there a clear difference between the time allotted to news items and the usual length of feature documentaries, but documentary filmmaking is also not meant to be breaking news. With feature films, the filmmaker usually gets around 90 minutes to elaborate something and to build on the chosen topic. That time can be used in different ways. In the case of *5 Seasons of Revolution*, one could even say it is multiplied by five. Even though the events unfold chronologically, we have a new entry point to the topic every time Lina zooms in on one of her friends.

- **Notion of *passeur***

According to French critic Serge Daney, filmmakers - and film critics alike - could be considered as *passeurs*. A *passeur* is a person who helps one to cross a river with a small boat or helps others to illegally cross borders. The term also suggests the idea of passing something to someone. Daney as a film critic also defined himself as a *passeur*, stating “*the passeurs are strange: they need borders but only to challenge them*”.¹

- **Following Daney’s description, would you say a journalist is a *passeur* as well?**
- **Are Lina and her friends *passeurs*?**
- **Pick and describe a scene that, according to you, confirms Lina’s role as a *passeur*?**

- **Notion of doubt**

“At one point I needed to own the imperfect conditions in undercover filmmaking.”^{*2}



*I miss clarity.*³ It is made clear at different moments that Lina struggles with doubt, both as a friend and a filmmaker. This scene (see: three stills) can be understood in two different ways. First off, quite literally, she shares an observation: the relationship with her friends is fizzling out because of their opposing political views and disagreements on how to resist the repression. She has doubts as to which side she’s on or whether she even ought to choose a side. The scene also refers to her position as a filmmaker. She wonders about the distance she needs to keep in order to continue recording and reporting. As she says herself: “*I found myself shifting between a witness, a friend, a silently observing filmmaker, and at times a journalist asking for answers.*” This doubt is reiterated in different moments throughout the film.

¹ English translation of *Le travelling de Kapo* by Serge Daney (Trafic 4, 1992) on Senses of Cinema, 2004

² 5 Seasons of Revolution Official Press Kit 2023

³ 5 Seasons of Revolution Official Press Kit 2023



By being very transparent with her tools and thoughts throughout her filmmaking process, she feeds into that second interpretation. The images of her manipulating her camera and other (hidden) recording devices serve to tell the story of the difficulties correspondents and journalists encounter when trying to report from war zones. But combined with her moments of hesitance and professional uncertainty, she offers a possibility of reflection on what filmmaking entails technically, morally and politically.

- ***In the credits at the end of the film, Lina dedicates her film to journalists, lawyers, paramedics, cybersecurity activists and all human rights defenders risking their lives around the globe. What do they all these people have in common?***
- ***Would you say they are activists?***

.....

It is important to note that the definitions of what journalism is or is supposed to be, much like documentary filmmaking, is constantly shifting and fluctuating. It is equally important to realize that we, both as consumers of news and as a film audience, have a role in the matter. We aren't nearly as passive a viewer as we're sometimes led to think. First, we are very often producers of images ourselves. We all have smartphones to cover events and to share instantly on social media. Does that make us a journalist, or even documentary maker? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Second, news-broadcasters and news room adapt to their audiences, their digital needs and the income viewers generate. News broadcasting companies can feel the economic impact just like any other company that has to absorb the consequences of a large group of people staging a boycott by refusing to buy their product.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

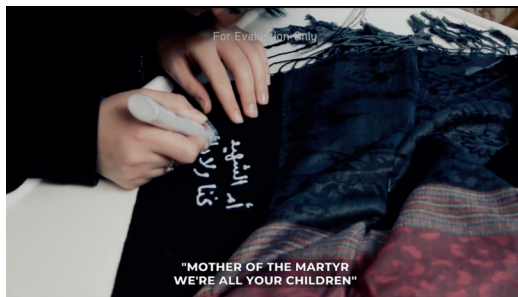
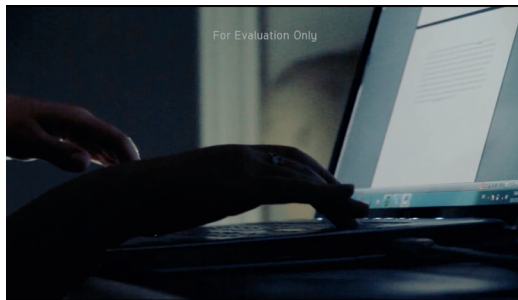
to listen: [The Telly Awards Podcast episode 6](#): video journalism vs. documentary filmmaking with Jika Gonzalez, Vice News producer and director, and Kristy Guevarra-Flanagan, documentary filmmaker and Assistant Professor at UCLA where she heads a master's programme on producing and directing documentary.

to read: [In defense of documentaries as journalism](#) by June Cross

5 FRIENDS, 5 WAYS TO RESIST

"With the footage filmed over the first years of the revolution in Syria, and later as it turns into a civil war, I tried to capture crucial moments in Syria's capital and in the hotbeds of conflict in Homs and Aleppo. Nevertheless, these events of national significance resonated deeply in personal and relational ways into our lives and altered our destinies. So, the film kept circling back to the lives of my friends and myself."

5 Seasons of Revolution is as much a film about resistance and it is about friendship. How did the civil war, the repression and the total media blackout challenge their friendships?



- Based on these images, can you reconstruct all the possible ways in which Lina's friends choose to protest? Try to recollect each friend's preferred method of opposition to the Syrian government
- Is there a better method, or a less impactful one?
- Can filmmaking be a form of protest?

PRESS PAUSE PLEASE: POSTER



Can you put into words what the poster of the film expresses?
What does the image convey?

privacy – violence – refusal – communication – language – hiding – pain – danger – light – power – knowledge
– looking – disagreement – seeing – concealing – protection – blurry – memory – conflict – woman – secrets

1 / Pick three words you associate with the image and explain why.

2 / Can you come up with an alternative scenario for the poster?

3 / If you could pick another picture for the poster of 5 Seasons of Revolution, which one would you choose and why?

FOCUS: DEEPPFAKE

Deepfake is a general term for software that allows you to create fake videos that are barely distinguishable from the real thing. With this software, one can make someone appear to say or do things that he or she never actually said or did. Deepfake is a form of *synthetic media*: media created or edited using artificial intelligence.

Deepfake will make it increasingly difficult to tell whether a video is real or fake but what exactly is a deepfake and how do you recognize it? And what are the potential implications (or benefits) for our society?

The name deepfake is a combination of the words deep learning and fake. *Deep learning* is a technique used by AI tools. It allows computers to learn new things based on large amounts of data, whether that data consists of numbers, text, sound or images.

Deepfake software thus deploys artificial intelligence to create fake videos that appear real. This type of software was initially very expensive and exclusive, only film studios in Hollywood had any use for these tools. Today, it's increasingly available for free download and use.

- **Can you guess when / where deepfake was used in the documentary?**
- **Can you think of other films that used deepfake technology?**
- **Can you cite examples of deepfake videos that went viral?**
- **In what way can deepfake become a gendered issue?**
- **What other audiovisual tools does Lina use to protect her friends and their privacy?**

Ever since deepfake technology has become available to the wider public, many debates have been fuelled by alarmist arguments about the dangers of the tool. But is it really a menace? Surely *5 Seasons of Revolution* has benefitted from the technology. Would Lina have been able to make her documentary without it? While it is true that other tools are available to protect the privacy of your protagonists, it seems that the deepfake software offers more narrative freedom.

Another example of a documentary using deepfake software might shed a light. *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020) by David France is a film about persecution of the gay and lesbian community in the Chechen Republic. The filmmaker was looking for ways to interview and follow his protagonists without putting them in harm's way by revealing their identity to their oppressors. He found it hard to connect with interviewees using the usual techniques: people's faces were dimmed in shadows, their voices digitally altered.⁴ Not unlike Lina, during post-production David France found a cloak of anonymity allowing him to tell a story that denounces human rights abuses while minimising the risk for victims involved.

⁴ *How deepfakes could actually do some good* by Rebecca Heilweil (Vox, 29 June 2020)

DANGERS OF DEEPPFAKE	BENEFITS OF DEEPPFAKE
•	•
•	•
•	•
•	•
•	•

TIP & TRICKS

Here's what you can do yourself to recognise deepfakes. A critical eye is the best tool to spot them.

1. Pay attention to visual clues. Do you notice any weird facial features? Perhaps around the mouth or the eyes? Watch the video at a slower pace to pick up on clues.

2. Pay attention to the source of the video. Is the author anonymous, a known news broadcaster or a name you do not recognize? Do some research if it's the latter.

3. Where else has the video been published? Find multiple sources.

- *Do you have any other tricks?*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

to watch: [Deepfakes: Is This Video Even Real?](#) by The New York Times. Claire Wardle, expert in online manipulation, wonders where the real danger lies: the technology itself or the way we use it?

to read: download the Reface app, take a selfie and make a gif with your face on it.

SYRIA: SIX KEY POINTS

The very complex, multi-sided and still ongoing Syrian Civil War was ignited by the **Arab Spring** revolutions. Large-scale protests and pro-democracy rallies against President **Bashar al-Assad** and his government were organised across Syria. Following the extremely violent suppression of the demonstrations, tensions quickly escalated into a full-blown civil war, involving **multiple factions** and **international actors**. The war has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, displacement of millions, and significant destruction of infrastructure and cities.

to watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5H5w3_QTGO by The Guardian (2013)

to watch: [The Syrian Civil War Explained](#) by Illustrate to Educate (2023)

(note: the following key points have been selected based on the events featured in the documentary)

- **Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s. It began in Tunisia and then spread to other countries: Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Syria.

The protests denounced problems caused by government corruption, unemployment, totalitarian rule, political repression, nepotism, discrimination of ethnic and religious minorities. The goal of the protests was to obtain democratic reforms and sustainable regime change. In some countries, the revolution showed initial results (Egypt). In others, it has caused massive political instability and economic hardships (Syria, Yemen). More generally speaking, the revolts met with violent responses from authorities and evolved into multiple large-scale conflicts.

- **Strike for Dignity**

The dictatorship and painful memories of the 1980s (see 1982 Massacre) made the population believe that the changes brought about by the revolutions in the region would never reach their country. And yet it took the country by storm on the 15th of March 2011 when hundreds of activists took to the streets against martial law and for dignity and freedom. With the Daraa province as its epicentre, the protest quickly grew into a movement of nonviolent demonstrations nationwide. Communicating through social media, a wide network of civil disobedience groups developed in the months following the first protests.

The general strike took place on 11 December 2011, with the shutdown of universities, shops and public transport. The symbol of the strike was a five-petal jasmine. The slogans and chants aimed for unity and emphasized togetherness: *“One, one, one, the Syrian people are one.”*

- **Bashar al-Assad**

Bashar al-Assad is the current Syrian president. He succeeded his father, Hafez al-Assad, who had ruled Syria since 1971. In spite of early hopes that his presidency would usher in an era of democratic reform and economic revival, Bashar al-Assad largely continued his father's authoritarian methods. Beginning in 2011, Assad faced a major uprising in Syria that evolved into civil war and an ongoing conflict.

- **UN Veto & the international community**

While Russia and China decided to veto an initial resolution in February 2012 aimed at bringing an end to the bloodshed in Syria and create the conditions for a meaningful political progress, both countries supported following resolutions against the Assad regime.

The Russians in particular had been strong allies of the Syrian government for decades and were very cautious of the transitions taking place in the Arab world. Syria in many ways remained the last bastion of Russia's influence in the region.

- **2012 Houla massacre**

The Houla Massacre was a mass execution of civilians by Syrian government forces that took place on the 25th of May 2012 during the Syrian Civil War in the north of the city of Homs. 108 people were killed, nearly half of them were children. The Houla massacre sparked worldwide reaction, with UN peace envoy Kofi Annan travelling to Syria to meet with President Bashar al-Assad. Condemned by the international community, the tragic event became a catalysing moment in the Syrian uprising.

- **1982 Hama massacre**

In a three-week siege during the month of February, the city Hama was razed by President Hafez al-Assad, father of Bashar Al-Assad, who wanted to crush a Sunni rebellion (Muslim Brotherhood). An estimated 20,000 to 40,000 innocent Syrians died as Syrian security forces combed the rubble, killing surviving rebels. The Hama massacre marked the end of turbulent years of unrest in Syria, tightening al-Assad's grip on the security apparatus of the state and on society.

FROM DAMASCUS TO THE GAZA STRIP: FOUR ANALOGIES

As Lina suggests at the end of her documentary: the conflict in Syria rages on. In fact, it is the reason why she decides to leave and the reason why Susu decides to stay. The consequences for the country and the citizens are devastating and Syria will need several generations to recover from the conflict. As we watch *5 Seasons of Revolution* today, we cannot help but think of the current events unfolding barely 300km away in the Gaza Strip.

- **Can you find the similarities or correlations between the documentary and the ubiquitous images we see on the news nowadays? Explore the connections between Lina & her friends in Syria and the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.**

- **Total (media) blackout**

Due to the total blackout installed by the Assad regime, hardly any news gets out from Syria. And as Lina mentions, the state media didn't cover the uprisings. The Internet is the final battleground for freedom of speech in countries where media and information is under government control and censorship.

Mid-January, the New York Times reported that phone and internet services in Gaza were down for the seventh day in a row, making the longest blackout since 7th of October.

- **Before reading the article: how many times have there been blackouts in Gaza since that date? And what does that mean for frontline news coverage?**

- **Citizen journalism & activism**

Lina mentions early on that the extreme violence with which the Assad regime responded to the Syrian Revolution wasn't covered by the state media. Lina and her friends took it upon themselves to report on it, to get the truth out through friends and colleagues abroad. Lina has studied journalism and was fresh out of school when the uprising started. But the lines quickly blur in times of war: are they journalists or activists?

- **Explore the Instagram accounts of two female journalists from Gaza: @noor.harazzen, @wizard_bisan1 and Gaza's youngest journalist, 9-year-old @lama_jamous9**

- **Expectations for the international community**

When Lina decides to leave Syria towards the end of the documentary, Rima and Susu want to stay. Their reply: *one world, one veto*. Russia and China in particular vetoed a draft UN resolution aimed at bringing an end to the bloodshed in the country and to create the conditions for a meaningful political progress.

- **Are there similar sanctions issued by the international community regarding the Palestinian struggle for liberation and the Israeli authorities?**
- **Do you know where your government stands on the issue?**

- **Leaflets dropped from the sky**

In the third season, Lina and her friends organise a nationwide strike along with many other groups. They print flyers and spread them through the city of Damascus. The next morning, shops were closed all over the country.



- ***Can you think of other instances where this system of communication, with messages spread out by aircrafts, is used? Were the intentions and situations similar?***
- ***Based on the images or the events of the film, can you think of other analogies?***

EPILOGUE

MIGRATION & DISPLACEMENT

The individual storylines of Lina's documentary come to an end when her friends decide to leave the country much in the same way as the documentary itself wraps up as soon as she makes the decision to flee. We receive a few pointers as to where they ended up, but we don't know anything about their journey. How easy or difficult was it for Malaz, Rima and Lina to migrate, to settle in another country and find jobs? Rima suggests the whole process of migration was based on trial and error: *I've been travelling, I floated, I ran away, I chased back. I tried and I failed.*

- **Can you explain in your own words what displacement means?**
- **Have you ever been confronted with displacement in your own country?**
- **What causes people to migrate? Explore the common factors for displacement**
- **Are the travel conditions the same for everyone?**
- **Different terminologies or labels are used to describe migrants. Some are contested while other are preferred. Can you name a few and differentiate them in your own words?**

- ***The Journey***

In Field of Vision's six-part documentary series *The Journey*, director Matthew Cassel follows Aboud Shalhoub on his trek from war-torn Syria to the EU, where he hopes to gain refuge for his family. The series captures Aboud's long trip to the Netherlands, the family's attempts to reunite, and the tide of nationalist sentiment sweeping across northern Europe. It was initially published on the website of *The New Yorker* and its total runtime is 70 minutes.

- ***I Am a Migrant***

Created by the International Organization for Migration, this [website](#) features migrant stories, revealing the personal and individual experiences of migrants from across the globe. The website offers the ability to search stories by country. Designed to promote diversity and inclusion, the campaign has a tendency to paint pictures of the "good migrant" with portraits that tend glorify the tales of hardship.

- ***Walk in my shoes***

Walk in My Shoes is a digital game developed primarily for young people in second and third grade of secondary education. Its goal is to present the complex subject matter of displacement and migration in a comprehensible and interactive way. At the same time, the game stimulates empathy and attempts to curb polarization. You can choose to follow Hassan who is 17 years old and grew up in Lattaquié, Syria and had to flee (FR/NL).

CREDITS

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