

## **The Exodus: From Pharaoh to... Bashar al-Assad!**

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So this is war: it shifts the familiar boundaries of our emotional worlds, opening up the possibilities for cruelty onto the infinite. And as the war intensifies every minute, Syrians continue to search in their daily lives for anything that could give them a trace of warmth or safety. A grim solitude coaxes our individual fears out from their hiding places. And then they walk among us all – a shared feeling, both the agent and the object of all that we do - in the shape of an enormous specter whose heart beats far from us, on distant Syrian lands. But the smallest of details must come to life somehow between the Syrian interior, which is being obliterated with every passing day, and the Syrian exterior, which is congested with the suitcases of refugees, exiles, émigrés, expatriates and mercenaries. Such details will stir in the living and the dead – at once – a faint sensation that the cold they feel at their extremities resembles a memory and that this memory, too, resembles the cold.

It seems that even the word “tragedy” can’t keep up with the daily harvest of destruction, counted in souls and cities and children - and in minds too. The phantasm of hope drifts away as the needle tracking the body count creeps higher. The needle quivers when a shell spitefully hones in on the very wall where Fear had fled for refuge – and then turns them both into rubble. But the cruel needle is still hungry and resets itself to zero. It throws the people waiting in line for bread off-balance, so they become an easier target for a wily pilot.

Whatever it is that we could agree – futilely - to call life is still generously bestowing its novelties on us. It spreads before us the fragments of a story about the children of war and its victims. It’s as though the hope that took root in us in the first year of the Syrian revolution is now punishing us, taking revenge on the dream that was rightfully ours. The violence of accumulated images is reaching its third year, bequeathing nightmares to its victims that throw them into utter dismay. It’s not long before the nightmares return to repeat their sins, and then the vision itself becomes the sin – or perhaps it’s exactly the opposite. It’s hard to put a name on all of these experiences, but they resemble nothing so much as the story of a little boy from Aleppo who appears in the short film, “Exodus,” recently released by the film collective Abounaddara.

The story goes like this: a Syrian child, “the hero of the film” who can’t be older than ten, hears a rumor that he can reach salvation (“Europe”) by traveling across the sea. What’s more, he can reunite his family there, rescuing them from the hell of war that has befallen their country. He reaches Alexandria somehow and prepares for his final journey across the sea. But the curse pursues him and he changes his mind the day before his planned voyage, calling his mother to tell her that he won’t go and wants to return to his family.

What made him change his mind? This unhappy child, disoriented in front of the camera lens, tells his story with quiet intensity. From the first moment, he tells us in his shaking Aleppo accent that his childhood had been violated. It's as though he's confiding to whoever is watching him: we grew up too fast. Or maybe we've already grown old.

There's nothing unusual – today – in the idea that a Syrian child would go to Alexandria to cast his fate and his family's fate out into the vastness of the sea. There, if he doesn't drown, then the bullets of the coastguard will get to him. It seems idiotic to search for the logical reasons that might have led a family to make such a decision for their child. So we need to put the picture in perspective - but we lack all the necessary coordinates. We don't know where the interview with this Aleppo child took place or whether he made it back to his family. Maybe these details are unimportant: the only thing we know for certain is that he changed his mind after he saw his dream.

It's a literary luxury to compare what happened to the Syrian child in "Exodus" to any other story for a single reason: the violence of al-Assad is far and away worse than any violence the human imagination could invent. The stories of "Exodus" echo tales mentioned in the Qur'an. In "Exodus," we see a vision created by the brutality of an ongoing tragedy. In "Exodus," a child sits in his striped *galabiyya* and tells us emphatically: the Law has abandoned us.

The film "Exodus" weaves its tragedy as the story builds in the viewer's imagination. This is because what's left unsaid in this film outweighs what's said. Evidently, if he had traveled across the sea and arrived safely, then the story would have had a happy ending, or at least acquired a whiff of melodrama. But instead, we find ourselves running into a contradiction when we try to call this segment of film, an excerpt from so many destroyed lives, a work of documentary cinema. Worse still when we try to locate our reactions to this film at the borders between ambiguity and empathy. This is not to take away from the work's artistic value; it's to account for the feelings of the filmmakers. For they too must have been overtaken by their imaginations and by a terrifying vision – the same one that will take shape in the mind of the viewer – otherwise they wouldn't have decided to make this film. They're the ones who worked on a story whose hero is a child who was saved from death multiple times: once from the Pharaoh's violence; once in his safe arrival in Alexandria; and yet again (and not for the last time) by his recent vision.

For words to make their impact, it's not necessary to blanket the screen in blood; to speak of violence; to show corpses and coffins and the injured and the murdered; or to let the voices of weeping and wailing ring out. It's enough for a child to speak before the camera for three minutes. And then, a documentary film comes to embody a vanquished reality in its symbolism, in its density, and in its cruelty too. And then, just maybe, the space of hesitation that opens up when we try to call this short film a piece of documentary cinema becomes a necessary and true condition of any narrative that can be recorded in a time of war.