

REALITY RECAPTURED: A NEW CULTURE OF DISCOURSE

A VISIT TO THE ARAB SHORTS FILM FESTIVAL 2011 AT THE GOETHE-INSTITUT IN CAIRO

By Amira El Ahl

PAYBACK

It could have been a good day. “I felt your love” the Egyptian singer was crooning on the radio, “my hope is for you to be happy”, transporting the taxi driver to a better place other than his low-class neighborhood somewhere in Cairo. And the young boy, who was queuing for some beans in the morning at the ‘fool’ stand had succeeded in squeezing in front of all the big men and ran down the street beaming with success. It could have been a good day.

But then it all turned sour.

The boy got a slapping from his father for bringing too small a portion back home. The taxi driver had an accident and the culprit got away with it, thanks to his *wasta* – his privileged contacts. The taxi driver was left with no papers and no compensation.

Where to go with all this anger and frustration from this injustice?

The taxi driver, a teacher during the day, has a favourite tool: a wooden stick that he keeps in the trunk together with his schoolbooks. Once he enters the schoolroom, the victim from the street turns into the perpetrator who abuses his position for power and submission. Dark eyes and grim faced, he walks through the small classroom; scared eyes looking up at him. Who will be his victim today? The boy, whose day had started so

promising at the ‘fool’ stand, knows that it is his turn when the teacher points at him. He does not know the answer to the teacher’s questions who is waiting in anticipation for the whipping. Wailing, struggling and fighting with his schoolmates who are asked to bring him to the front of the room, the boy knows that there is no escape. Although his feet show marks of previous beatings, the teacher knows no mercy. He beats the boy over and over again on the soles of his feet, taking out his anger, avenging all injustice he had suffered from earlier.

Violence, social injustice, corruption – issues deeply rooted in Egyptian society.

The boy gets a beating because the taxi driver had a bad day. The taxi driver gets punished for an accident that someone else had committed. The officer who acquits the culprit, forces the young woman who was sitting in the back seat of the cab to give him a blow job – otherwise she will end up in a prison cell. The young woman has to prostitute herself to make a living for herself and her mother. She gets molested even at home, where the father of the little boy rents out a room to her and her mother. “I am here to collect the rent,” the father says and forces himself on her. Her disgust at herself and the life she has to lead shows when the young woman sees her reflection in the mirror over the sink. She cannot look at herself without throwing up her feelings of utter disgust.

The lives of the characters in Omar Khaled’s short narrative *Payback* are intertwined, and we

watch them facing a world of oppression, violence and social injustice. Screened at the Arab Shorts 2011 of the Goethe-Institut in Cairo, this short film was shown as part of a program titled 'Personal Freedom: Fiction Within The Truth.' Curated by Hala Galal and Ayman Hussein, the program explores questions of fiction and truth and how the difference between both can be gauged. "There is always truth in fiction, and much of reality is too unacceptable to be conceived as true," they write in their curatorial statement. "This program represents reality, where what is real may seem unreal to many." More than any other program in this year's festival, their selection of short films deals exclusively with current events.

In *Our Weapon*, Ziad Hassan tells the story of a group of friends who use graffiti to express their opinions after the 25 January Revolution.

Suspended Freedom by May El-Hossamy follows a housekeeper around Cairo, who travels half the city every day to work in different houses, scraping a living for herself and her children. We see her cleaning houses, cooking and struggling through Cairo's traffic while talking about her personal life. Her husband, imprisoned for seven years, had escaped during the 25 January Revolution – a fact that does not seem to make her life any easier. For the two Egyptian curators it was a conscious decision to show films only from their home country. "Based on what was happening here and all the new work we had been exposed to, we wanted to focus on films from Egypt," says Ayman Hussein. All but one film were made in 2011, focusing on the day-to-day life in Egypt after 25 January or the conditions that led to the revolution, as portrayed so harshly in Omar Khaled's fiction *Payback*.

Fictitious or realistic/fiction or reality? This was one of the main points discussed by the audience and filmmakers after the screening of *Payback*. "I was very impressed by this movie, however, it really is a harsh portrayal of a society," says Marcel Schwierin, artistic director of Arab Shorts. Were plot and characters exaggerated for dramatic purposes? Can this be a realistic reflection of reality? "From my point of view, this film expresses what is happening as part of Egyptian daily life," says Ayman Hussein, although the film was made in 2010, a year before the political upheaval that ousted former president Hosni Mubarak. "Egypt still suffers from a vicious circle of violence, especially among the economically weaker classes. And this violence continues," Ayman Hussein says.

This is highlighted by the sad fact that the film's screening coincided with news of the death of

23-year old Egyptian Essam Atta after being tortured by police in prison. The political upheaval in the Arab world has deeply affected every strata of society. It was not only visible in the highly political programs of this year's festival, but also felt reality throughout the five-day festival.

On Friday, the day after the opening, many filmmakers and curators chose to join the protests in Tahrir Square, just a few meters away from the Goethe-Institut, to show their solidarity with the pro-democracy movement. Essam Atta's body was brought to the square and the filmmakers from all around the Arab world were deeply moved by this experience.

"I got carried away by what I saw there," says Ali Benkirane from Morocco, who joined the screening of his film *Amal* late, because he had joined the protests in Tahrir.

In the afternoon of that day, the curators of the Arab Shorts 2011 meet at the "White Box" in the gardens of the Institute, in order to discuss organizational issues. But many who sit around the table seem absent-minded. The noise from the square, rallying cries echoing through megaphones from Tahrir-Square, make it difficult to concentrate. Yazan Khalili, curator from Palestine, joins the meeting late. He has come directly from the square, on the back of his hand glow the Egyptian colors – black, red and white. "I did not want to, but before I knew it I had a flag painted on my hand," he says while looking down at his hand. Others don't make it at all to the meeting, because they are protesting in front of the prison where Essam Atta was tortured to death.

The Arab world has seen dramatic changes in the past year and the Arab Shorts Festival thus faced a new challenge in its third year in existence. With its largest program so far, the Arab Shorts presented eight programs, curated by eleven curators from Egypt, Algeria, France, Tunisia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Palestine. All in all, forty eight films from twelve Arab countries were screened. "There is a huge variety of short films in the Arab world and we wanted to reflect this variety by choosing eleven curators." Marcel Schwierin explains the idea behind the format of the Arab Shorts 2011: In the past, curators received specific instructions on how to choose their films; in 2009, curators represented their home country, in 2010 they were asked to work with a particular theme. This time around curators were completely free to make their own choices. The only criteria they had to adhere to were that first, films had to have an Arab component, second, the whole program is not to exceed

a maximum of 70 minutes overall with each film no longer than 30 minutes, and third and finally, at least one of the films per program should have been produced within the last three years. The core question of what constitutes an “Arab” film remained open for interpretation.

“To put a program together is maybe as intimate as making a film,” says Marcel Schwierin. It was important for him that curators from the Arab world would choose the films for the different programs. “To curate myself would have had implied something post-colonial for me.” A trained photographer and filmmaker, Marcel Schwierin has worked exclusively as a freelance film curator since 2004 – “a job description that I basically created in 2004,” he says. Ever since, he has co-founded the Werkleitz Biennial in Halle (Saale) and the Internet database cinovid. He is also curator for the transmediale Berlin and curated regularly for the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen. He is the brain behind the Arab Shorts, launched the festival in 2009, and has been its artistic director ever since. What makes Arab Shorts special for him is its strong socio-political orientation. “You get a very rich view on the Arab world and its societies.” Through the media one is always confronted with the same images, the same old clichés: angry young men, Orientalism and Internet savvy men and Arabs who are seen as revolutionaries, explains Marcel Schwierin. In contrast, many films at the Arab Shorts present the political side within very private settings, and show, for example, how the dynamics of family networks work and how this in turn affects society and politics.

THE STADIUM

It is a cold night. He has his coat collar pulled up, the smoke from his cigarette is visible against the



The Stadium

dark street lights. The cigarette. He has one constantly between his lips, sucking on it as if it were to keep him warm, as if it is the only thing left for him to hold on to. A cigarette. He is walking through the dark city, his feet slurping on the floor, his back hunched as if he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. He looks as if he is being pushed to the ground by an invisible force. His face is that of a man who has no expectations anymore; sad, hopeless, exhausted. Deep lines are cut into his face, a face that has seen a lot and does not want to see anymore. He walks with his cigarette in his mouth, followed by a dog, through the deserted city. He walks into a bar, where he downs some drinks. Nobody speaks a word but the radio presenter who is talking about a football match. There are some other clients, but everybody seems to be on their own sad and lonely planet; nobody speaks to each other. Only the youth on the street talk, about football and the match, just like the presenter on the radio. The man continues his walk, passing a construction site and empty streets until he buys a sandwich, which he devours. He is exhausted. He looks up, takes out a cigarette and looks through his black-rimmed glasses at a group of youngsters standing at a distance. He puffs heavier and heavier at the cigarette, as if he was pumping himself up with courage. Then he stands up, slurps over to the young men, as fast as his hunched body allows him, looks provokingly into the round and receives what he silently has been asking and hoping for: a straight hit in the face.

The Stadium by Ala Eddine Slim, Tunisia, is an oppressive drama that creates a sensation of suffocation through its slow moving narrative and the dexterous use of light. Over the course of 24 minutes the viewer moves with the old man through a dark city, where the hero vanishes from view most of the time. The director depicts the city as a big prison where citizens live dehumanized, with



Payback

no soul, without hope. The film traces a gloomy picture of the psychological state of Tunisia and its citizens before the January 2011 events. “Free expression, critical creativity and alternative art were not possible and associative, cultural and civil work, independent of the ruling party and the regime was a form of resistance that the regime tried to suppress,” writes Walid Tayaa, curator of the program ‘Metaphor and Resistance in Tunisian Short Films’ in his introduction to the films. With its underlying message it is surprising that *The Stadium* was produced in 2010 under the auspices of the Tunisian Ministry of Culture.

A reason might be the basic nature of short films. “Short films are often produced below the radar of censorship,” explains Marcel Schwierin. Because they are short and unlikely to be screened in front of a big audience, the censors do not take much notice of short films, an advantage which provides them with more freedom of expression and criticism. Nevertheless, they do get a social relevance once a critical mass is formed. An example is the Arab Shorts that drew in crowds of people to the Goethe-Institut in Cairo. Films such as *The Stadium* and *Payback* are a mirror for the audience, reflecting the appalling realities of their societies.

AMAL

But is their hope? *Amal* – which means “hope” in Arabic – certainly believes so. The twelve-year-old is a paragon of energy, happiness and lust for life. She aspires to becoming a doctor, a wish so strong making it her only priority. She owns a little treasure tin box that contains a stethoscope, with which she listens to her heartbeat with indulgence. Every beat a promise for life, a different life than the one Amal leads with her mother, father, brother and elder sister in the Moroccan countryside. “I have one single wish – to become a doctor and take care of all the ones I love,” she says in a whispering, excited tone. Every morning she wakes up with a smile on her lips and her first direction is towards her box. She takes out the stethoscope, walks over to her sleeping brother and presses it against his chest. At school, a long walk through the countryside away, she listens to her girlfriend’s heartbeats during the break and after school her teacher gives her a book about the human heart. “If you want to really thank me come back through this door in 15 years with your diploma in your hand,” the old man says. But he also knows that it is a long road for her, especially as a girl. Neither the teacher nor Amal know yet that

it will be her last day at school. At night her mother tells Amal that from the next day on she will have to stay at home. Her sister will move to the city and her mother needs help in the house. A world falls apart for Amal, whose eyes fill with tears, but no word of resistance leaves her mouth. She knows that she has to obey. Her brother pleads for her with his father but to no avail. “Amal is grown up now and the road is too dangerous for her.” But he also thinks that there is no reason for her to continue her education, as there will be no work waiting for her once she graduates. Why spend all this money?

At night Amal lies on her mattress, a candle flickering in front of her eyes. She gets up and puts the stethoscope next to her brother’s pillow. They don’t speak a word until Amal blows out the candle and says into the dark: “Good night.” Her dream has just died.

“Amal means hope and her parents are killing the hope inside of Amal. I wanted to show that she will wake up as a different person,” says Ali Benkirane. The director produced this fiction film in 2004 in Morocco. It was his first film. “This really is a movie that tackles the whole MENA region,” Ali Benkirane says. “It is about human potential and what we do with it, since it is the wealth of every society.” Besides *Amal*, Nadira Ardjoun, curator of the program titled ‘Childhood:Innocence’ showed four further films about the lives of children in the Middle East. How does the life of a child in Palestine, Morocco, Lebanon or Tunisia look like? What are the children’s everyday realities? How are they affected by the decisions of adults through political manoeuvres and social traditions? “Children bear the consequences of others,” says Nadira Ardjoun. “For me it was important to let you know what children are suffering from, because far too often we forget that children are suffering too, that they bear the consequences of decisions taken by adults.” In the introduction to her program she writes: “A child has no choice; it must, all by itself, grasp reality as it is and often without explanation from adults: more remains unsaid than answers their questions. No words to channel the suffering that is originally not theirs.”

Nadira Ardjoun, who has been the co-organizer of the International Short Film Festival in Clermont-Ferrand, France, since 1985, chose the topic of childhood because it is universal. But there is a decisive difference between Europe and the Arab world, that Marcel Schwierin points out in the discussion following the program: “I was surprised by the obedience of these children. In Europe there would be much more conflict. Here it seems that the



Amal



Children of Fire

My father is still a communist:
Intimate Secrets to be published

kids – in all films – accept their fate without any rebellion.” Maybe because rebellion, which requires an opinion or a position was nothing that was ever encouraged by elders, be it fathers, teachers or rulers. Obedience is a deeply rooted concept in all Arab societies. It was also a tool to keep the masses silent and to direct them as needed by rulers.

Without intention by the curators the topic of childhood became a strong theme throughout the Arab Shorts 2011. “I was really surprised by that,” says artistic director Marcel Schwierin, “since the curators were totally free to choose their topics and films.” Nearly all programs featured films that evolved around children and their relationships with their parents and how political and social circumstances affect their lives.

Children play the lead in *Children of Fire* by Mohammed Al Hawajri, a colorful and powerful documentary about children in Gaza who burn their fears and paint the dark with fire at night. In *Paper Dress* by Kasem Kharsa, a young Iranian woman recounts childhood memories of her sister’s illness that are illustrated with Persian miniature cut-outs reminiscent of a fairy tale or a children’s book. Both documentaries are part of Ala Younis’ program ‘Everything is Alright, Officer.’

Additionally, *Land of the Heroes* by Sahim Omar Kalifa, was shown in the program ‘Path To Solitude’ curated by Masoud Amralla. It is the story of ten-year-old Dileer and his sister Zienee who live in the border region between Iraq and Iran. It is 1988, the conflict between the two countries is reaching its final stage. Dileer and his sister want to watch cartoons, but there are two obstacles to that modest wish: the national broadcaster, that cancels the cartoons in order to show images of the last victory on the battlefield, as well as cousin Malo, a bully that tantalises Dileer especially, who wants to be a superhero.

In this fiction something else strikes the viewer: the absence of the father. Where he is – fighting

against the Iranians or possibly deceased – is never explained. Many films at the Arab Shorts 2011 evolved around the topic of the absent father. “Maybe Arab societies want to get rid of their father figures,” Marcel Schwierin suggests as an explanation for this unexpected phenomenon.

MY FATHER IS STILL A COMMUNIST: INTIMATE SECRETS TO BE PUBLISHED

“My life will be reduced to dust, as the saying goes, while you remain young and healthy, just like your father. And then you will go and marry another woman.” It is 1978 and the female voice on the tape sounds sad, longing and playful at the same time. She is talking to her husband Rachid, “my love, my soul, you are the pulp of my heart,” the one that has left her behind in the mountains of south Lebanon to find his luck and work abroad. Their only tool of communication, the only way to hear the voice of the beloved, to talk about longing, love and everyday life, is by sending tapes. “Everything fades away, everything disappears in the end, so let it go,” she urges her husband. It is 1982, and he is still far away from his homeland and family. Her urges for his return home and her playful yet serious threats to destroy his passport next time he comes home, so he would stay with her and keep her warm at night have been in vain. Her voice sounds tired, somewhat disillusioned, facing life and the responsibilities of child rearing on her own. “There is only little space left on the tape, let me find you a song on the radio,” she says and then the soft, warm, yet always longing and sad voice of the Egyptian singer Abdel Halim Hafez fills the air.

It is sound, voice and words that are the storytellers of Ahmad Ghossein’s fiction film *My Father is Still a Communist*, which was shown in the program ‘In the Name of the Father’, curated by Lara Khalidi and Yazan Khalili. The images of the film seem to

function only as a backdrop while the story unfolds through the voice of Maream on the radio cassettes sent as love letters to Rachid during the time of the civil war in Lebanon. It seems throughout the film that these tapes are the only thing that is left from their relationship. We see images of a wedding, when both were young, smiling, holding hands and dancing together with family and friends in addition to all these pictures from the family album. Maream in her wedding dress, Maream holding a baby in her arms, Maream jumping into a pool and Maream with the kids in a park. It is always the father that is missing, who is now walking through the images as if to make up for lost times. Old and out of place, he tries to get into the family picture, putting his arm around Maream. But it is too late, only an illusion, times are lost forever. Never throughout the 32 minutes of the film do we see Maream and Rachid together, even now in old age they seem to be separated. She in the house they built for the family, him going through old family pictures. They do not find each other anymore. She looks sad, exhausted and disillusioned while we watch her going about the chores of her days. Alone, without her kids not her husband.

My Father is Still a Communist was the starting point for the curatorial team of 'In the Name of the Father.' They built their program around this film, because the issue of the father was something Lara Khaldi and Yazan Khalili had been talking about for a while, the latter explains. "We did not try to connect this program to the revolutions, but we tried to connect it to the role of the patriarchy," says Yazan Kkalili. They were driven by their own relationships with their fathers, both politically involved in different Palestinian organisations. "Somehow we always wished we could have lived their lives. The 'Arab Spring' really changed this." The conflict of the disappearance and the existence of the fathers, that seemed to play a vital role in many films at the Arab Shorts 2011, was possibly such a dominant feature because the revolutions also questioned the role of father figures in the Arab world in general. In this respect, without showing the raw documentary images of the currently fresh revolutions, the festival was highly topical and initiated debates concerning current political and social issues.

In 2009, Arab Shorts started as a project in support of independent Arab filmmakers. Apart from the festival, that was intended to be a one-time show but was so successful that it was continued for three years, the Goethe-Institut has organized film-screenings, presentations and discussions as well as visits of Arab film experts to German film festivals and institutions. The Arab Shorts project

also includes an online platform that features about 100 films shown at the Arab Shorts in the past years. This web resource was meant to work as a means of making the rich and diverse scene of Arab short films internationally known. Until now Arab Shorts already has proven to be an important research source for tens of thousands of anonymous users who visit the site and watch the movies. "Some of them we know: curators, festival organizers, distributors and TV emission purchasers and they even use Arab Shorts when looking out for talents," explains Marcel Schwierin.

Over the past three years the festival has developed and changed. "In 2009 it was quite an experiment," Marcel Schwierin says. "And I say experiment because we only had nine months to organize the event." Usually such an event takes more than a year in preparation time. Marcel Schwierin came to Cairo for three month to launch the Arab Shorts. There was yet no 'Viewing Lounge', as in 2010 and 2011 and Marcel Schwierin ended up as a projectionist, because there was nobody else who could do the job. "It was crazy and chaotic but also amazing and very creative," he says of this first Arab Shorts festival. In 2010 the festival turned out much smaller. Marcel Schwierin and the Goethe-Institut had not intended for the festival to continue, but due to its big success it was decided later in the year to make it a three-year project. This time around the curators from the Arab world did not have to represent their home country as in the Arab Shorts 2009 but were alternately given a theme to work with. In 2011 all these guidelines were dropped and the curators were free to choose the theme and any films that had an Arab component. With eleven curators and eight programs it turned out to be the biggest Arab Shorts festival, and also the most successful. For five consecutive days the projection room at the Goethe-Institut was packed with people. "It means, that the people really appreciate this festival," says Ala Younis. "It is a small victory for securing these alternative places to host cultural events." For Marcel Schwierin, it was the best Arab Shorts, "also because the discussions after the screenings with the audience were so refreshing." He realized a change in the way people commented and reflected on the films compared with the last two years. "There seems to be a new culture of discourse." The debates were open, friendly and minted with the wish to understand and learn. "You can feel that the audience and the filmmakers really want to benefit from this festival; they are eager to exchange and learn from one another," Marcel Schwierin recaps his impressions.

AL WADI

The valley must be cursed, there is no other explanation. The valley crosser is at a loss. “I have five donkeys, but whenever I walk them to the middle of the valley they become four. When I come back to my starting point, they become five again.” Nobody seems to be able to give him a satisfying answer to this mystery. Neither the digger, who is hunting for treasures in the sandy ground of this dry and deserted valley, nor the soldier who wants to pass the valley or the Sheikh who has come to bury a person. But many things seem to be curious in the valley. Why does the Sheikh resemble the image we traditionally have of Jesus, with long hair, a beard and a shawl over his head? Why is the soldier unaware that the river, that once upon a time ran through this valley, has dried out? And why is the digger collecting broken plastic plates that he finds on the ground? “It is plastic, it must be from the plastic age,” says the valley crosser after some serious contemplation. Made in China. “Ah, it seems that the Chinese enslaved the English people in an attempt to find Noah’s ark in this area,” the digger concludes. “There is a theory, I will write a book.”

Al Wadi, part of Ala Younis’ program ‘Everything is Alright, Officer,’ is a comedy set in the future but playing heavily on traditional symbols. “Normally when we see films on the future we are confronted with a lot of technology,” says the director Firas Taybeh. “I wanted to work differently. After many wars, in the future we could go back to an old age – maybe even a golden age.” His fiction film was inspired by folk stories from the Middle East. Every child in the Arab world knows about Goha and his strange adventures. Hundreds of stories exist of Goha, and his donkey is an integral part of every one of them. Goha embodies the Arabic humor like no other figure, but very often the listener will gag on his own laughter since his stories live not only from its humor but also from its shrewdness and its

often deserved malicious joy. “We all look for the truth, and usually it is very close to us, closer than you think, Firas Taybeh explains his decision to use a story from Goha in his film.

Ala Younis writes in her introduction that her program “examines the acquisition of news gained by means of constructed space: Events and people appearing in the news are assimilated from bits and pieces of description given by others. The Arab revolutions that broke out at the onset of 2011 have affirmed that the media pick and choose only what matches their policies for broadcasting. (...) It remains to be the case that our knowledge of truth relies on a narrator’s story, just as we imagine stories of pure fiction.” Her title ‘Everything is Alright, Officer’ is a quotation from a film by Syrian director Mohamed Malas, which he made with the Egyptian writer Sonallah Ibrahim. The film is about a group of prisoners who read old newspapers smuggled into prison. But the news is always belated news. “Living this effect of belated news linked the film to the program,” explains Ala Younis, who is the only curator who took part in all three Arab Shorts festivals. It is the theme on the state of destruction and instability that guided her through the process of choosing her films for the program. “And as a matter of fact, NOT everything is alright at all this year,” says Ala Younis. The state of revolution and the uncertainty of what will happen were the themes that she was looking for in her selection. “It has been a challenge to find films that present this vagueness.”

The heavy use of symbols in *Al Wadi* became a topic of discussion after the screening. Why were the donkeys disappearing, why did the Sheikh look like Jesus and which problems did the director encounter during his shoot? These were only a few questions tackled during the debate. “Well, my biggest fight was with the donkeys,” Firas Taybeh says and laughs.

The debate was one example of many of how engaged the public was at the screenings and how



Al Wadi/The Valley



Al Wadi/The Valley

interested to exchange with the filmmakers and curators. “You can feel that there is a lot of meaning in the discussions here, a kind of urgency that you don’t find anymore in the West,” says Marcel Schwierin. Also compared with the two previous years the discourse gained in strength. “Since the revolution there seems to be a whole new culture of debate,” Marcel Schwierin notes, an observation that was affirmed by many participants. “The kind of debate I encountered here I have not experienced in a long time,” says Stefanie Schulte Strathaus from Arsenal – Institute for Film and Media Art, Berlin, who presented a guest program from Berlinale Forum at the Arab Shorts. “It is extremely refreshing and amazing to witness how eager for knowledge and exchange people here are.” A reason for this difference might be the fundamental issues that are at stake in the Arab world, the profound changes that are affecting the political, social and economic spheres. “It is definitely true that the artists in the Arab world work more intensively, with more passion and much with regard to content,” describes Marcel Schwierin the differences in artistic relevance between Germany and the Arab world as he sees it.

INTO THIN AIR

The images that are running over the screen are blurry and it is difficult to make out the faces. No matter how often they are rewind, one cannot see any faces. But they are not needed to feel the fear that must be written in all of them. The fear, the panic in their eyes is tangible in every second. Hundreds of people are running down a street in fear of their lives. Some fall to the ground, put their hands to the ground, get up and continue. Others run, turn around with their hands over their heads and start screaming something that cannot be heard, into the direction from which the people are running. There, in the distance, stands the army and shoots at peaceful protesters. “Some of the people in the footage returned home. Some didn’t,” says a voice from the off.

The audience watches spellbound, no sound can be heard in the room. It feels as if everybody here must know these images, either lived through them or saw them on TV. The only difference is, that these images are not images from Tahrir-Square in January 2011. Mohammadreza Farzad’s documentary *Into Thin Air* is a film about the “Bloody Friday” massacre, which took place on September 8, 1979. The footage documents the shooting of innocent

people by soldiers in Jaleh Square in Tehran.

Into Thin Air was shown as part of the guest program presented by Stefanie Schulte Strathaus from Arsenal, ‘Re-Moving Images,’ “a short film program about political changes as they are seen in (and empowered by) the world of images, and about the productive process of decay,” as Schulte Strathaus writes in her introduction.

Tahrir Square in Cairo 2011 or Jaleh Square in Tehran 1979 – the images resemble one another so much, that it takes one’s breath. And then suddenly, while the film is still running, loud screams from a fight break into the silence of the screening. Many heads in the audience turn nervously. It is an unreal moment, where through the images on the screen and the sudden noises from the street outside, the people are transported back to the days in late January, when just around the corner from the Goethe-Institut the Egyptian police was attacking peaceful protesters and hundreds died. Egypt is still in a state of alert and everybody here knows it. The images on the screen, the massacre in Jaleh Square, serves as a reminder that history always repeats itself.

“For me the amazing thing about Arab Shorts is that it shows reality in many different facets,” says Marcel Schwierin. From fiction to documentary to video art to animation – the artists and filmmakers don’t deal with merely academic, but existential questions. “What impressed me the most in the past three years is, that art is done with so much earnestness in this part of the world,” says Marcel Schwierin.

And the current political upheavals will only add to the creative output in the Arab world. Therefore, even though Arab Shorts was meant to be a three-year-project, all people involved are sure that in one way or the other Arab Shorts will carry on.

Amira Sayed El Ahl is a German-Egyptian journalist and foreign correspondent Near and Middle East based in Cairo.