

## FILM AND CINEMA STUDIES IN REVIEW

### Refugees Searching for Home in the Syrian Diaspora

Ryan Watson

Misericordia University

*Taste of Cement*, 2018. Color, 85 min. In Arabic with English subtitles. Director: Ziad Kalthoum. Distributor: Torch Films, <https://www.torchfilms.com/products/taste-of-cement>.

*All Roads Lead to Afrin*, 2016. Color, 35 min. In Kurdish, Russian, and Arabic with English subtitles. Director: Arina Adju. Distributor: Torch Films, <https://www.torchfilms.com/products/all-roads-lead-to-afrin>.

*In Procedure*, 2016. Color, 60 min. In Arabic, English, and Dutch with English subtitles. Director: Jiska Rickels. Distributor: Torch Films, <https://www.torchfilms.com/products/in-procedure>.

*This is Home: A Refugee Story*, 2018. Color, 91 min. In English and Arabic with English subtitles. Director: Alexandra Shiva. Distributor: Gidalya Pictures, <http://gidalyapictures.com/portfolio/this-is-home/>.

Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, a plethora of international documentary films has been produced about the conflict. Many of these films, particularly those made in the early years of the war, such as *Return to Homs* (2013), focused on the brutal fighting, massive destruction, and widespread death and trauma suffered by the population. This proliferation of documentaries was driven partly by the lack of consistent, accurate media coverage of the war, notably in the West, due to the difficulty of gaining journalistic access to the country. Beyond these documentaries, the gap in coverage was also filled by ordinary Syrians with amateur cell phone videos uploaded to YouTube and other sites as well as documentaries and short works produced in and through collectives such as Abounaddara,<sup>1</sup> an anonymous media activist group that provides stories beyond the spectacles of violence and victimization (what they call “emergency cinema”) via video-sharing channels such as Vimeo.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.abounaddara.com/>.

In the most recent iteration of longform international documentaries about Syria, a new sub-genre has emerged that also looks beyond images of the war. In a number of recent films, directors have moved from representing the spectacle of the conflict to documenting the lives of some of the millions of Syrians who have been displaced over the past nine years. According to recent estimates by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 5.6 million Syrians have fled to neighboring countries, including Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq, with another 6.6 million displaced from their homes within Syria.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, about 1 million have sought asylum in Europe. This essay reviews four recent documentaries about this Syrian diaspora: *Taste of Cement* (dir. Ziad Kalthoum, 2018), *All Roads Lead to Afrin* (dir. Arina Adju, 2016), *In Procedure* (dir. Jiska Rickels, 2016), and *This is Home: A Refugee Story* (dir. Alexandra Shiva, 2018). All four films engage notions of identity, profound loss, and the search for home while offering highly varied and moving portraits of the Syrian refugee experience.

Ziad Kalthoum's *Taste of Cement* (2018) is an essay-film that focuses on the themes of creation and destruction intertwined with an effective political critique regarding the rights, place, and treatment of Syrian refugee workers in Beirut, Lebanon. Kalthoum was born in Homs, Syria, and began making short documentaries in 2011. The film is comprised of static, dramatically composed long-takes interspersed with war footage, montages of men laboring, and close ups. The soundtrack is often immersive, particularly in scenes of construction in Beirut and fighting in Syria. Here, the cacophonous complexity of the sound borders on overwhelming at times, but also evokes the richly expressive soundscapes of the anthropologist-filmmaker Lucien Castaing-Taylor's and the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab's documentary work. At other times, the soundtrack relishes silence, offering a sonic respite for the viewer. *Taste of Cement* was produced in part by Bidayyat, a Syrian organization that, like Abounaddara, arose in the early years of the Syrian Civil War.<sup>3</sup> The group produces and supports Syrian-made documentary, experimental, and short films that offer a slice of everyday life and issues in Syria beyond the spectacles of war and destruction.

*Taste of Cement* documents part of the construction of an anonymous half-built high-rise on the outskirts of Beirut. Throughout the film, we watch a nameless group of Syrian men, who make up the majority of the

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bidayyat.org/>.

construction crew, as they go about their typical days. *Taste of Cement* also features disembodied voiceover narration, which, coupled with the sound choices, endows the images with the force of critique. For example, early in the film, the camera lingers on a sign that reads “curfew imposed on Syrian workers after 7pm, any violator is punished by law.” The voiceover later notes that racism is spreading toward Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It’s easy for the viewer to make the connection between the danger implied by the curfew and the othering and hate that Syrian workers face. During the day, the men toil away at various construction tasks, perched high above Beirut with the Mediterranean Sea gleaming in the distance. In the evenings, due to both the stultifying curfew and low wages, the men reside on the construction site in makeshift living quarters in the basement of the building. They are imprisoned by the cement. Before the men retire for the night, they huddle near one another on damp concrete and in dim light to consume news from Syria on their phones. They scroll through images of Aleppo and Damascus in ruins. In one particularly evocative shot, the camera focuses on the eyeball of one of the men as he views a video of bombs exploding. The bursts flash across his pupils as quick, jagged shards of light. It is left to the viewer to imagine what he may be thinking and feeling as he witnesses this violent destruction of his country from afar. The only ground for optimism in the film is that one day the men may return to Syria to build it instead. As the opening narration notes, “When war begins, the builders have to leave to another country where the war just ended. Waiting until war has swept through their homeland. Then they return to rebuild it.” The film ends with a dedication to all workers in exile. Throughout the film, Kalthoum often juxtaposes images of the cement rubble in Syria with the construction cement used in Beirut. Creation and destruction often look similar, but the implicit message of the *Taste of Cement* is that the workers in this situation are refugees, living in an abject situation, stuck re-building a foreign country while their own is being destroyed.

Arina Adju’s 2016 film *All Roads Lead to Afrin* opens with a shot of reverse migration: Syrian refugees returning home through a northern border with Turkey. The film is a short, personal essay that depicts Adju’s stay with her father Mohammad and his family in the city of Afrin in northern Syria. Adju, a Syrian-Russian filmmaker, resides in Moscow with her Russian-born mother (her parents are divorced) and must cross the Turkish border by foot to enter Syria. While millions of Syrians have fled, some have also returned home or travel to and from the country from locations abroad, which can engender a similar loss of a sense of home. During Adju’s visit,

Afrin was under the control of the Kurdish-dominated People's Protection Units (aka YPG). Early in the film, as she rides in a car from the border to Afrin, the driver assures Adju that she is safe in "Kurdistan," a reference to the area being dubbed "Syrian Kurdistan" until the YPG was driven out by Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces in 2018. Fighting in the film is limited to glitchy digital images projected from the living room television accompanied by the muffled sounds of news presenters narrating the after-effects of regime bombings outside Damascus. The film is shot on a consumer-grade camera and utilizes a series of thoughtfully composed static shots and long takes to represent daily life in Mohammad's home and in Afrin. We meet Adju's father Mohammad, her three half-sisters, half-brother, and, briefly, her step-mother. Adju captures a good deal of the family's private life: changing clothes, sleeping, eating, playing, and engaging in emotional discussions. The depiction of these typical activities coupled with the use of a consumer camera create an intimate "home movie" aesthetic. Outside the home, filming in Afrin presents challenges as the law forbids the recording of police officers, soldiers, or funerals. When Adju furtively captures a few moments of a funeral procession for a slain martyr she is arrested by local police, the first of two instances that she was detained during her stay.

Later in the film, in a late-night discussion, Adju urges her father to flee Syria with his family. But he articulates the harrowing dilemma of living in an active war zone, namely the danger of fleeing versus staying: "If I lost my entire family [fleeing]" Mohammad notes, "I'd lose my reason to live. But. . . things will get worse, [if we stay] I know." Moments later, to underscore the danger of fleeing, Adju includes a scene of her father watching a news story in which Austrian authorities discover the bodies of more than twenty Syrian refugees who had perished in a truck near the Hungarian border. Beyond the war, Adju also probes her relationship with her father and her place in the family now that he has a new wife and children. She tearfully confides in him how isolated she feels in her role as a daughter who now has to share his love. While not a refugee herself, Adju depicts the tension of coming back to a place that was once home, but is now unfamiliar – a situation and loss faced by most returning refugees. *All Roads Lead to Afrin* ends with Adju leaving the family behind, returning to Turkey to continue back to Moscow. The film's portrayal of a brief reverse migration and the pain of personal family troubles and loss of home works as both a powerfully personal essay and as a glimpse of the dislocation and anguish experienced more widely in the Syrian refugee population.

Jiska Rickels' evocative documentary *In Procedure* represents this dislocation and anguish as it follows Hassan, a father of four who has left his wife and children in Hama, Syria, to seek asylum in the Netherlands. He does so for two main reasons: first, his teenage daughter Yomna has Hodgkin's Lymphoma and her health is deteriorating from the stress of war and lack of available chemotherapy. Second, during the Civil War, Bashar al-Assad's forces had been rounding up and re-arresting former prisoners. During the reign of Bashar's father Hafez al- Assad, Hassan was imprisoned three times, most notably after he was involved in the infamous protests by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 in his hometown of Hama. Here, Assad's forces massacred thousands of demonstrators; Hassan notes that he saw more than eighty people shot and killed before his eyes. He ended up spending eleven-and-a-half years in the notorious Tadmor Prison in Palmyra, where he was routinely tortured. Now, Hassan lives in a Dutch government-provided refugee shelter. Rickels got the idea to make the film when she worked in a similar shelter and absorbed the many harrowing stories from the influx of Syrians she worked with. The film is an observational documentary, shot mostly in a "fly on the wall" style, where the viewer witnesses Hassan completing mundane tasks and meeting with his lawyers. This footage is often intercut with Hassan speaking on the phone to his wife and family in Syria. The combination of these types of footage and their intimate content allows the viewer to quickly empathize with Hassan and his perilous situation.

Hassan's room in the shelter is sparse and institutional looking, consisting of two lockers, a small table and chairs, and a bunk bed. He chain-smokes and paces the grounds of the facility. Hassan is also frequently on his phone messaging his family through WhatsApp. During these moments, Rickels will often cut to cellphone footage shot by his daughters or wife waiting in Syria, a marked change from the well-composed, richly saturated cinematography that characterizes many of the scenes shot in the Netherlands. As the weeks wear on, Hassan meets with a lawyer and an interpreter who guide him on his path to asylum. The interpreter, Jamila, is also Syrian and a former asylum seeker. Hassan's application is eventually approved, and he is quickly given priority for family reunification due to Yomna's grave illness. During this time, the conditions in Hama had become so dire that the family was forced to flee to Turkey. Thankfully, Jamila is able to raise the funds (through her mosque) to fly the family from Turkey to the Netherlands. The climax of the film consists of an emotional family reunion scene at the airport, and at the end of the film, we find out that Yomna's cancer is in remission.

Hassan and his family bear an inhuman amount of stress throughout the film, but the delicate intimacy and intense empathy that Rickels is able to evoke make the positively joyful conclusion to the narrative all the more cathartic.

Alexandra Shiva's *This is Home: A Refugee Story* (2018) shares the story of four Syrian families that received asylum in the United States, where only around 21,000 refugees have been accepted for asylum.<sup>4</sup> Shiva's film concentrates on Baltimore, Maryland, where 372 refugees have been resettled. *This is Home: A Refugee Story* is a straightforward expository documentary that utilizes a mix of observational style shots interspersed with interviews. The film documents members of each family as they cope with getting a job, grocery shopping, going to the doctor, and taking classes at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) headquarters, among other ordinary tasks. The IRC coordinates refugee placement and ensures that asylum seekers abide by the many rules and regulations related to asylum in the United States. Once they arrive, the families have eight months to get jobs and become self-sufficient. They are required to accept the first job that they are offered. Early in the film, the adults take life skills classes that include basic English and emergency information. The confusion, fear, and sense of being overwhelmed are palpable on their faces as they face a cascade of unfamiliar information and foreign experiences. Adding to these challenges, many of the newly arrived Syrians bear scars and trauma from their previous lives. For instance, Khaldoun, a former auto mechanic, who arrived with his wife and four children, matter-of-factly tells a job placement caseworker that his leg is disabled because he was repeatedly tortured with a drill while in prison in Syria. He lifts his pant leg to reveal a massive scarred gash. In another family, Mohamed, a fourteen-year-old boy, has had frequent nightmares and anxiety since he arrived with his parents, Mahmoud and Madhia, and three siblings. The men had practiced a range of occupations from skilled artisans to doctors. Yet, they are placed in very low-skilled jobs and addressed by the IRC staff as if they are children. In one scene, during a life skills class, a well-dressed Syrian man who we are not introduced to mutters "this is so humiliating." Further, and unlike in Syria, women are required to work, which presents a point of contention for some men.

The asylum process seems much less straightforward and humane compared to the Netherlands. For instance, the parents of one family, Iman and her husband, arrived in the United States ahead of their

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/742553/syrian-refugee-arrivals-us/>.

children in an effort to establish permanent resident status. After more than two years, they are still in limbo, but the girls were able to gain entry to the United States by applying for refugee status on their own from Jordan. In the end, it appears that all the families have successfully adjusted to life in the United States. One finds work as a truck driver and another works at a cosmetics company. Madhia is beginning a catering business and her son Mohamed has graduated from middle school. One works at Johns Hopkins University while awaiting her asylum decision. Others are continuing their education. From the outside, it certainly seems as if all the families have successfully integrated into their larger communities. But, there is little representation of how they are coping with the emotional and mental strain of war, moving, and adjusting to a new country and way of life. Like *In Procedure*, *This is Home: A Refugee Story* comes to a fortunate conclusion after much heartache and strife.

The concept of home in the four films, in particular, is a fraught and painful phantasm that exists only in the fading haze of memory. The subjects in each film yearn and search for something that no longer exists – a way of life and importantly a way of being and knowing the world. Removed from their extended families, neighbors, friends, and culture, the refugees of the Syrian diaspora are slowly making their way and outwardly building new lives (or buildings) and identities in exile. Yet, on the inside, there is likely unimaginable trauma, pain, and sense of loss – the kind that lingers for a lifetime and is difficult to represent visually. *In Procedure* would work well in introductory and advanced undergraduate as well as graduate classes in film and media studies. *All Roads Lead to Afrin* and *Taste of Cement* would be appropriate for advanced undergraduate or graduate courses in film and media studies, as both end without narrative closure. All three films deal well with the complexity and intricate panoply of intense emotions of Syrian refugees as they render artistically and conceptually advanced portrayals of lives in flux. Both *In Procedure* and *This is Home: A Refugee Story* would work well as an introduction to the topic of Syrian refugee resettlement in a variety of disciplines. However, their cheerful endings, while cathartic, may leave a casual viewer with the impression that the refugee crisis is somehow solved or under control, which it certainly is not. Millions are still in limbo and far away from any idea of home. ✂

DOI:[10.1017/rms.2020.20](https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2020.20)