

COLOR CORRECTION

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ABSTRACT

COLOR CORRECTION is a short fiction film that addresses the dilemma of Syrian women refugees who fled their stricken country seeking asylum in neighboring countries like Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt, where they were exploited into marriage through brokers and marriage-agencies.

Set in Egypt, my film's protagonist, Lama, gets married to a much older man through a broker. The story unfolds over the course of the first three days of their marriage, in the groom's apartment, where she keeps trying to avoid his questions about her past life and his insistence to have physical contact with her. After his attempt to kiss her violently, she runs away while he is asleep. In the lobby, she is surprised to see a piano, a gift from her husband. And the film ends with her torn between leaving the building or going back and giving her husband a second chance for his nice gesture.

I am glad to add this film to my previous projects where I try to explore the repercussions of the post Arab Spring in our Arab world.

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INTRODUCTION

When I arrived in Canada in 2018 to pursue my MFA degree in the York University Film Production program, I already had my thesis script in 120 pages. It was set in Egypt and featured Arabic dialogue. I wasn't sure about the potential of producing it during the program duration of 5 terms. After a few weeks, I became certain that it would be too difficult. Thus, I started to work on a new short script that would engage with the same theme and feature the same characters of the full-length script. Some colleagues suggested that I make the short as a calling card for the feature, but I wasn't interested in making the same story twice. Kafka once said, "We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds."¹ Accordingly, If I drive this story out of my mind in a short film, it would be hard to retain the same urge and energy to produce it in another film.

Despite the fact that the story occurs in Egypt and requires Arabic speaking actors, my decision was to film in Toronto. The reasons were mostly related to financing and the availability of free equipment in Toronto; I also had a passion to try something new, step out of my comfort zone, and into a new professional challenge. The Dogma 95 movement and films like, *The Five Obstructions*², were memorable references to how creative ideas can emerge and thrive when a filmmaker encounters obstacles or limitations. It is also worth to mention a relevant quote from

¹ Peucker, Brigitte. 2007. *The material image: art and the real in film*. California: Stanford University press, 104.

² 2004. *The five obstructions*. Directed by Leth Jorgen and Lars Von Trier.

T.S. ELIOT: “When forced to work within a strict framework, the imagination is taxed to its utmost and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom, the work is likely to sprawl.”³

Inspired by the Dogma 95 manifesto, I wrote my own manifesto on sticky notes and placed them on the wall of my room. The manifesto included obstacles or rules related to the script writing and the pre-production stages, such as:

- No exterior scenes should be included in the script unless it is possible to film them in Toronto--as if Cairo.
- The script should not have more than two main locations and they should be interior.
- The story, the dialogue, and the characters should be structured Tactfully, since the film’s goal is to address the problem in a subtle way that encourages dialogue and reconciliation between Egyptians and Syrians.
- The Syrian lead character must be played by a Syrian actress. It would be advantageous if she lived in Syria during the Syrian war.
- Find an apartment that is furnished with Egyptian furniture in Toronto.
- Find GOOD Syrian and Egyptian speaking actors in Toronto.

These rules/questions might seem too simple to be considered challenges, however, it took me five months of constant research to find my cast, and two months to find an apartment that was furnished with Egyptian furniture. Moreover, there were other obstacles which most of independent filmmakers deal with--insufficient budget and very limited shooting days. Producing this film was a stressful experience because I am an international student working in a

³ McKee., Robert. 1997. *Story. Substance, structure, style, and the principles of screenwriting*. New York: ReganBooks, 304.

new environment; I encountered times of despair during which I was about to surrender and abandon the project. However, I was able to complete the project thanks to many people who supported me in Canada. I had the most generous supervisory committee who have been always supportive and encouraging, and I was lucky to be surrounded by amazing friends who supported me. I am grateful to my school for affording the necessary in-kind resources, along with several grants and funds which helped a lot in financing my film; and I am grateful to many colleagues who joined my crew and cast as volunteers, and invested their time and energy to help me making this film.

I have learnt a lot on this journey, starting from dealing with a sensitive topic that needed extra care in treating it for the screen and to learning to trust my instincts by not compromising despite the constraints of time and limited production.

THE TOPIC

In 2012, as the Syrian war was at one of its terrible peaks, a large number of refugees were forced to flee Syria to seek asylum in the neighboring countries like Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt.

Around that time, I was flying back to Cairo from Beirut. A few minutes before landing, a Syrian woman in the seat beside mine, asked if I could recommend an affordable hotel. I was heading downtown where a number of affordable hotels were located, so I offered her a ride in the same taxi.

On the way to there, she told me that she had to leave her family for serious health reasons. The plan was that she would try to find a job in Egypt and save enough money to bring her family from Syria. Although I was aware of the Syrian refugees crisis, this brief conversation gave me a better understanding of the suffering of Syrian refugee families, and urged me to further explore their situation in the region.

A few weeks later, I learned about the phenomenon of marriage-agencies and how brokers were earning commissions by facilitating marriages between Egyptian men and Syrian refugee-women. They publicized everywhere, in the streets, online, and even in mosques. They worked closely with Syrian brokers, and marketed their business as an endeavor to help poor Syrian immigrants settle in Egypt.

The commissions, paid by men, were determined by the bride's age and virginity status, however, commissions were affordable to most of Egyptian men, especially when compared to the expenses of an Egyptian-Egyptian marriage. Syrian women were known for their beauty and

respectful manners; therefore, the turnout was noticeable especially among some religious Muslim groups who claimed that they wanted to save helpless Muslim women.

Many Egyptian activists and intellectuals strongly condemned this phenomenon and considered it a form of human trafficking, but this sort of marriage continued to take place, not only in Egypt, but also in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and other countries where Syrians immigrated. The focus of my research however is the Egyptian model.

Egypt and Syria have a special relationship, since they were united in one sovereign state, United Arab Republic, from 1958 to 1961. Both nations share many similar cultural backgrounds and practices which have resulted in smooth social interaction between them. It is not surprising that many marriages would have taken place between Egyptians and Syrian refugees without any need for brokers. The marriage agencies were mere an opportunity for some brokers to earn extra money by exploiting the urgent needs of traumatized women.

It is crucial to mention that the relationship between Egyptians and Syrians was too strong to be affected by this phenomenon, and that this kind of marriage has diminished in the recent years after being criticized and condemned by media and intellectuals. Syrian immigrants still consider Egypt a second home where they have lived in peace and harmony with Egyptians who welcomed them with love and sincere sympathy.

THE RESEARCH

The goal of my research was to learn more information about this phenomenon mainly for the purpose of getting inspired before writing a fiction film story. The research outcome outlined in the coming pages, shouldn't be considered as an accurate scientific reference to the phenomenon or the archetypes of people involved in it.

The information listed in this section, are built upon my observations as a Cairo-based Egyptian filmmaker, and on a lot of articles, interviews, Facebook pages, and videos, which were published on the internet to address the phenomenon. Some examples can be found in the online references below.

Note: The sources below include a TV report that addresses the issue of brokered marriages and interviews an Arab women-rights activist who gives her opinion about it. They also include some Facebook pages which were created to connect people who sought this sort of marriage. Unfortunately, all of the sources listed here are in the Arabic language and haven't been translated.

- TV report: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTCByeIMcuQ>
- Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pg/zawaj.soryat/posts/>
- Website: <https://arabgirlsnumbers.com/بنات-سوريات-للزواج-ومكاتب-6-أكتوبر>
- Article: <https://www.dw.com/ar/السوريون-في-مصر-زيجات-النساء-واثبات-الإسلام-للرجال/a-1943712>
- Facebook page: <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/Syriamarried/>

Facebook pages like those listed above, are often good sources of information about this issue; on these platforms, members are required to introduce themselves with basic information about

their marital and financial status, along with description for what they seek in their desired partners.

As a Middle-Eastern filmmaker, I was curious to explore the circumstances and motivations that drove people to seek this kind of marriage, with a particular focus on the plight of women refugees who had this experience. My standpoint as an observing artist was always driven by sympathy for all people involved regardless of any ethical concern about their roles and the benefits they might have sought. This section wasn't meant to judge or stereotype anyone, and shouldn't be deemed a generalization about the phenomenon or the people who were involved in it.

- **THE BRIDEGROOM**

A few main categories of Egyptian men sought marrying Syrian women refugees through brokers or marriage agencies:

- Men who were already married and wanted to have second wives.

These men were likely in good financial standing and could afford having two families.

- Men who were already married and didn't mind having second wives, but they were financially incapable of doing that in the regular circumstances.

However, and since many Syrian women-refugees had almost no demands but to live with dignity with responsible husbands, these middle-class men were eager to marry them. Some of these men were religious and considered these marriages as endeavors to save Muslim women from a frightful fate.

- Men who were never married because they were too poor to afford conventional Egyptian marriages.

Therefore, it was a good opportunity for them to have beautiful wives and make families for affordable expenses.

Regardless of the category, a huge number of these marriages ended in divorce within a few months. A common reason for these divorces was that men weren't committed to marriages. They were apparently more driven by the fantasy of having new wives. Nevertheless, the divorce decisions weren't always taken by men, since often women called for divorce due to the lack of understanding or shared interests between them, suffering bad treatment from their husbands or their mothers/sisters in law, and the irresponsibility of their husbands.

- **THE BRIDE**



*Image 1: A still image from the film Color Correction.
Nour, Ahmed Color correction, (2020)*

It was difficult to make contact with Syrian women-refugees who went through the experience of this type of marriage in Egypt. It took me several months to get an appointment with two women who worked in one of the Syrian Women Associations in Egypt, and when I met with them, they told me that they were reluctant to meet me because they had negative impressions about Egyptian men; “Egyptian men think we are cheap, we’re not!”, one of them said.

Her main complaint was about receiving many phone calls from Egyptian men asking her to find them affordable Syrian brides. The lady said that she did not mind that Syrians and Egyptians get married, but this should happen after the bride and the bridegroom have enough time to know each other in conformity with our religions and traditions. Despite these annoying calls, she was

grateful to Egyptian people for welcoming Syrian immigrants in Egypt, helping them to settle, and feel safe and secure. The women tried to connect me with a few women who married through brokers, but they couldn't convince them to speak with a stranger like me about their experience.

In Toronto, I met with another Syrian woman who lived in Egypt for 4 years before coming to Canada. And while she didn't have the experience of this marriage herself, she told me stories of women she knew. I also found articles and videos of women who shared their stories online. A few examples are in the online ARABIC sources below which feature the stories of women who suffered from their unsuccessful brokered marriages.

- Article: <https://akhbarak.net/news/2016/05/14/8609498/articles/21956988/-3-الستر-المفصوح>
[سوريات-يروين-قصص-زواجهن-بالشباب](#)
- Blog: <http://shabab1.mam9.com/t18535-topic>
- Video report: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDyA7E5ka80>

In another story a young Syrian refugee describes the trauma of losing her husband in the war:

- Youtube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9GbyFRc9V8>

There were Syrian immigrants who arrived in Egypt with their family members unharmed from war, and with adequate savings. They were able to purchase houses and start their own businesses.

On the other hand, there were many Syrian women who arrived in dreadful financial and mental conditions due to the trauma of war and losing their beloved ones in Syria. They didn't have enough money to live and pay rents, and it was not easy to find work in a society with a high unemployment rate. Some of these women were totally alone, and some came with their

vulnerable family members like elderly parents who needed care. Consequently, many of these women thought of marriage as a possible solution for their plight. However, there were other Syrian women who wanted to have Egyptian husbands regardless; they loved Egypt and wanted to merge with the Egyptian culture.

Many of the women who sought marriage through brokers were desperate and unable to find alternative solutions for their trauma. The following quotes from Espin's book on the psychology of immigration, emphasize the hardship of immigration and exile, especially for women, even if the host society speaks the same language:

- "The experience of immigration into another country, either forced or voluntary, is another example of a life transition that can trigger anxieties and create unique psychological consequences for individuals who migrate."⁴
- "Pressures on immigrant women's sexuality also emerge from outside their own culture. The host society imposes its own burdens and desires through prejudices and racism. While returning women to their traditional roles continues to be defined as central to preserving national identity and cultural pride"⁵
- "Even supposing that the immigrant is in a country where his own language is spoken (although it can never be the exact same), his/her speech act will take place at a particular moment of time and in a distinctive set of circumstances different from those he/she has known."⁶

In my view, women refugees who sought brokered marriages were likely suffering from PTSD that affected their decisions. They definitely needed immediate mental and financial support rather than alleged help in the form of marriage to strangers.

⁴ Espin, Oliva M. 1999. *Women crossing boundaries a psychology of immigration and transformations of sexualit.* New York ; London: Routledge, 15-16.

⁵ Narayan, Uma. 1997. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism.* Newyork: London: Routledge, 20.

⁶ Grinberg, Leon, and Rebeca Grinberg. 1984. "A psychoanalytic study of migration: its normal and pathological aspects." *SAGE*, 100.

- **THE BROKER**



*Image 2: Wedding scene- A still image from the film COLOR CORRECTION.
Nour, Ahmed Color correction, (2020)*

Most of the brokers charged flat commissions, and then bridal dowries from husbands, upon signing the wedding contracts. Their commissions and the bridal dowries varied, depending on, the age, the level of education, and the virginity status of the bride.

There were some brokers who were working only through their personal networks. There were others who created Facebook pages or similar web pages. And there were those who established agencies and started to work in a more professional way.

It is worth mentioning that there were Egyptians and Syrians who really wanted to help facilitate marriage for Syrian women and Egyptian men and did not charge any money for their voluntary services.

WOMEN AND THE ARAB SPRING

Egypt has a long history of feminist movements that have fought against the injustice of patriarchal society; however, to this day, rights are still not granted to Egyptian women, nor to most of Middle-Eastern women. Margot Badran wrote,

“Over the years, activists in Egypt seeking human rights, inclusive of women’s rights and social justice, pushed strenuously for reform. They tried to use classical methods—the vote, the press, television and radio, and public demonstrations—but elections were rigged, the media controlled, and public demonstrations met with violence, which for women often included sexual harassment, molestation, and rape.”⁷

The women’s role in the Arab Spring revolutions was impressive; women haven’t ceased to inspire men by their persistence and their extraordinary courage in each and every phase of the Arab nations’ struggle.

Lucia Sorbera noted, “During the 2011 revolution, women writers and intellectuals, alongside students and working-class women, inundated the public space, the square, to assert their will, as Egyptian citizens, to remove the regime”⁸

Despite the fact that they were always targeted, Egyptian women continued the struggle. They endured unprecedented deliberate sexual assaults and forced virginity tests, and yet have never given up the battle.

Political women-activists have played fundamental roles in the Arab Spring uprisings through their ongoing applications in theorizing for human rights and democracy, leading the protests in the squares, and confronting bullets and tear gas bombs. Sadly, despite all their sacrifices,

⁷ Badran, Margot. 2011. "Egypt’s revolution and the new feminism." <https://www.resetdoc.org/story/egypts-revolution-and-the-new-feminism/>.

⁸ Sorbera, Lucia. 2014. "Challenges of thinking feminism and revolution in Egypt between 2011 and 2014." *POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES*, 63-75.

brokered marriages took place at the same time when Arab people were fighting for their human rights. Arab feminists and intellectuals have done noteworthy efforts to cease the spread of this phenomenon, nevertheless, these marriages still take place in the countries where Syrians refuge.

FILMS ABOUT THE SYRIAN CRISIS

The evolution of the Syrian conflict has been unpredictable, with many countries getting involved, and the scene has become more and more surreal. As earlier stated, my research goal was mainly to observe the scene from a humanistic perspective regardless of any political tendency. I wanted to develop adequate feeling and understanding for the situation in order to be able to embody the Syrian character as a writer who hoped to give her a voice. I viewed a number of documentaries that were very helpful to me in understanding the suffering of Syrians during the Syrian war. Below are some of these documentaries:

- **Our Terrible Country**⁹
- **Last Men in Aleppo**¹⁰
- **Of Fathers and Sons**¹¹
- **The white Helmets**¹²

I also viewed fiction movies about the Syrian war, such as:

- **In Syria**¹³
- **Rain of Homs**¹⁴

⁹ *Our terrible country*. Directed by Mohammed Ali Atassi and Ziad Homsy.

¹⁰ *Last Men in Aleppo*. Directed by Feras Fayyad.

¹¹ 2018. *Of fathers and sons*. Directed by Talal Derki.

¹² 2014. *The white helmets*. Directed by Orlando von Einsiedel.

¹³ *In Syria*. Directed by Philippe Van Leeuw.

¹⁴ *Rain of Homs*. Directed by Joud Saeed.

These are not news reports. Rather they focus on the human experience of Syrians who live under the stress of war. They don't only show scenes of explosions and destructions, but they also live closely with the protagonists who struggle to survive and protect their families against the blind attacks of bombs and missiles. Moreover, they capture the trauma of those who lose their homes and loved ones, and those who are forced to flee their home cities following dangerous routes into the unknown. These films were very helpful to me in imagining my character's backstory and her mental condition as a refugee who underwent circumstances similar to those presented in these films.

Although most of these films are brilliantly made in terms of form and cinematic language, my focus while watching them was the content. I wasn't concerned about the forms or the tones of these films, since my story required a different form that I will discuss later in this paper.

MY STANDPOINT

As a filmmaker, my instinct drove me to condemn the socio-political circumstances which created the landscape and forced people to try to survive by any means. I don't mean the Arab Spring revolutions, I mean the circumstances which led to them--dictatorship, the lack of human rights, inequality, poor education, and the religious and military states. All these elements created perfect environment for brokered marriage and similar practices that violate women and human rights.

My creative choices in structuring the story and its characters--which I will elaborate on in the next chapters--are not intended to be melodramatic. I am aware that creating a story that features a malevolent husband and a helpless wife might have been more realistic, and probably, would

better serve a women-rights narrative, however, my choice was to feature a female protagonist who has some traces of the contemporary strong Arab woman.

The story takes place at a time when this independent woman is traumatized due to war, loss, and being abandoned by the man who she loved and believed in. All these circumstances drive her to make decisions that she wouldn't make normally. I hope this will raise questions about other traumatized women who went through similar experiences but weren't as educated or strong as our female protagonist, and most probably were married to much worse husbands.

WRITING THE SCRIPT

Actually, I can't remember how many drafts I had written, I started to lose track of them after writing the 12th draft. It was a challenge to strike a balanced narrative that wasn't judgemental. My choice was to make a story where the characters are anti-heroes. There should be no conventional antagonist but the awkward situation of a man and woman who meet for the first time on their wedding day!

The research phase helped me to learn about the stereotypical stories and their archetypical characters. My goal however was to move beyond the stereotypes. I wrote the first draft of my script as outlined below. It was temporarily titled: *Playing the Air*.

INITIAL STORY OUTLINE

The initial story outline was about a young Syrian woman refugee, a former pianist, who flees the Syrian war and the loss of her parents, and takes refuge in Egypt, where the state of PTSD drives her to marry an Egyptian middle-aged elevator-clerk, through a broker.

The 25-pages script, written back in December 2018, focused on the wedding night as the protagonists reach the husband's apartment, where their opposing wants and needs come to a conflict -- she evades having sex with him, while he tries to sate his sexual needs-- he is a virgin who has longed for marriage. The narrative concentrated on the inner conflicts of the protagonists, depicted in surrealist scenes and awkward situations.

The story ended with the woman leaving the apartment while her husband is sleeping in the other room, after realizing that she could never forget her former Syrian partner or start a new life with a man who she didn't love.

STORY EDITING

I would like to acknowledge the vital role of Prof. Marie Rickard's screenwriting class 5130 in developing my understanding of the art of screenwriting, and introducing me to the story editing techniques. In this course, we weren't only required to write our own films scripts, but we were also trained to story edit each other's works. The story editing assignments helped a lot in improving my critical skills and my ability to diagnose script problems –my own as well as others.

A good example of a useful comment I received from Prof. Marie and also from some of my colleagues, was regarding my initial plot point 2 or second turning point. My first draft's second turning point was as follows:

The male protagonist takes VIAGRA expecting to sleep with his wife, but later, she refuses to have sex with him. He goes to sleep in another room where he encounters some side effects like palpitation and headache. He calls a friend who urges him to have sex with his wife otherwise he may have a heart attack. Consequently, he goes back to her room and tries to kiss her violently, and then we reach the climax as she slaps him on the face and locks her door.

Their feedback was that it read more like a comedic plot point. I thought It could be solved by a serious acting performance, however, I did not want to risk the tone of the film because of a plot point that could be changed without affecting my theme or controlling idea. Thus, I removed this event and replaced it with a confrontational scene between the two protagonists. For the first time we see her strongly criticizing him and his reasons for marrying her while he defends himself and shows his good intentions. It was a good end for act 2, since it increased the tension and revealed the characters' goals before reaching the climax in the final act.

That was an example of the comments that were useful in the rewriting process. It is always crucial for writers to seek feedback on their scripts from other professionals; the comments they receive can help to diagnose problems and reveal solutions, and this definitely helps in writing the following drafts.

REWRITTING

I kept writing new drafts of my script, many elements were added and others were excluded, which is the normal dynamic of creative screenwriting as Robert McKee describes it, “Creativity is creative choices of inclusion and exclusion.”¹⁵

It is hard to state all details of the rewriting phase here, however, I can address the basic changes which eventually marked the final draft:

- Illustrating the woman’s backstory earlier in the film so as to justify why she may seem passive at some moments, and to provide an explanation for her state of PTSD.
- Adding a dramatic event to the resolution to make the ending open and more interesting (After she leaves his apartment, she meets piano movers delivering a piano to her husband at the building door. The gift ribbon in which the piano is wrapped, indicates that it is a present for her. And then, the film ends by a shot for her torn between leaving or going back and giving him a second chance after his nice gesture).
- Extending the course of the story from one day to three days.
- Changing the title to Arabian Marriage, then to A Spring Marriage, and finally to Color Correction.

¹⁵ McKee., Robert. 1997. *Story. Substance, structure, style, and the principles of screenwriting*. New York : ReganBooks, 76.



*Image 3: The ending scene- A still image from the film COLOR CORRECTION.
Nour, Ahmed Color correction, (2020)*

- Condensing the events, trimming the dialogue, and shortening the script to about 20 pages.
- While experimenting with the 16mm film, I liked the surreal look of the nail polish paint on clear film and decided to use it in the film. To justify its use, I added a detail to the woman's character where she meticulously cares about her nails. Accordingly, the nail polish paint on 16mm, was deployed as a visual metaphor that added another layer to the narrative enriching the film's visual and formal properties.



*Image 4: Nail polish paint on 16mm film-A still image from the film COLOR CORRECTION.
Nour, Ahmed Color correction, (2020)*

- I worked on the dialogue carefully and kept updating it; I was aware that especially in such a sensitive story, choosing the right word was crucial. It was important to avoid using any word that might be provocative to Syrians or Egyptians.

I was writing the script in English first, and then translated the dialogue into Arabic -- which was more like rewriting the dialogue, since each language has its own linguistic character. Finally, after making these changes, the script was in a better shape and was approved for production.

A PLOT TWIST

I would like to acknowledge the tremendous help I received from Prof. John Greyson in the pre-production phase. He kindly introduced me to many local artists, and was keen to help me creating a professional network in Toronto so as to find my cast and crew.

Casting was hard. It wasn't easy to find Arabic speaking actors in Toronto. Despite posting casting calls on all possible platforms, I wasn't receiving enough applicants and I couldn't find the cast who I was looking for.

I extended my research scale and encouraged first timers to apply. After 6 months, I was finally able to form the majority of my cast members drawn from both professional and first-time actors.

I was lucky to find Amani, the actress who played the female leading role. She is a very talented Syrian actress who spent a few years in Syria during the war. Her real experience as a Syrian who witnessed the Arab Spring, along with her amazing talent, enabled her to embody the character and project the complex feelings through her expressive face and flawless performance.

I was also lucky to find Leila and Marwa, who played the sisters. In spite of being first timers, they were receptive for direction. Karim and May, who played the brokers, were also excellent. I was blessed to have such talented cast who had enormous passion for acting. However, I could not find any actor who met the initial criteria for the male leading role. In the end, I had to make a radical change in the script in order for it to accommodate the characteristics of a very good actor who auditioned for a secondary role. He was about 20 years older than the lead character's age, but he was charismatic. Crew members who attended his audition or saw its video, liked

him though most of them didn't understand the language. Some crew members, my wife, and my supervisory committee, encouraged me to modify the script to have him play the role.

It was a challenge, since viewers might not root for a man who married a much younger woman, and I didn't want that. Therefore, I tried to recreate a likable protagonist--preserving the anti-hero structure of the original character. Here are some of the new character's traits:

- He is a retired accountant who never liked his job.
- He hates noise and thus soundproofed his apartment.
- He never liked children but recently started to dream about having a baby girl.
- He is an introvert who never married and never thought he would need a woman in his life.
- He is fond of horses, but when he tried horseback riding, he had a bad fall.



*Image 5: The husband-A still image from the film COLOR CORRECTION.
Nour, Ahmed Color correction, (2020)*

These small details layered the character and made it difficult for audience to have one common judgment on him. I wanted audience to sympathize with my characters even if they disagree with their practices, and to have different or even opposite wishes for what should happen after the film's open end.

After rewriting the script, I called the actor, Jabbar, for a second audition to make sure he was the right choice. He was very good although he needed some work mastering the Egyptian accent before the shoot. His effort was impressive. He delivered a memorable performance in this film.

The final phase of writing was a process of constant modifications to accommodate the specifics of the available locations, and ongoing work on translating the dialogue from English to Egyptian, and then from Egyptian to Syrian with the help of the Syrian cast members.

THE FINAL STORY OUTLINE

A young Syrian woman, a former pianist, flees the Syrian war and the loss of her parents, and finds refuge in Egypt, where her PTSD drives her to get married to a much older Egyptian man through a broker. The story unfolds over the course of the first three days of their marriage, as she keeps trying to avoid his questions about her past life and his insistence to have physical contact with her. Their opposing needs and wants come to a conflict and she realizes that she can't forget her former Syrian partner and start a new life with a man who she doesn't love.

After his attempt to kiss her violently, she runs away while he is asleep. When she reaches the lobby, she is surprised to see a big piano with a gift ribbon, and a piano mover speaking with his manager about delivering the piano to her husband. She realizes that it is his gift to her, and the

film ends with a shot for her--torn between leaving the building or going back and giving her husband a second chance for his lovely gesture.

The final draft came in 14 pages. My preliminary estimation for the final picture duration was to land between 25 and 30 minutes. We completed the pre-production process, then we went to camera.

THE FORM

As previously mentioned, the story focuses on a tense awkward situation for the protagonists as they try to deal with it. Capturing credible performances from the actors was indispensable.

LONG-TAKES/B&W

I planned to shoot the film in long-takes to allow enough time for the actors to show their characters' complex feelings and to convey the hardship of the story events on them by using the least possible intervention of coverage. However, taking some extra coverage for a few scenes as a safety procedure was in my plan.

During scouting, most of the locations that we found suitable, lacked enough space to create the complex camera movement I had planned for. Consequently, I thought of relying on static shots or shots with smooth dolly movements which could be achieved in narrow places, and then prepared my final shot-list accordingly.

On the first shooting day, we had a busy schedule, and we encountered some problems that caused a few hours delay before we were able to start our shoot. This made the long-takes form and the economic number of shot coverage, not just an artistic choice to serve the drama, but also a necessary strategy to save the shooting day.

As a result, I had to abandon the initial plan of getting extra shots for safety or any unnecessary coverage, and focus on shooting every scene in the least possible amount of shots, if not in a single shot. French filmmaker Robert Bresson wrote in his notes, "Not to use two violins when one is enough."¹⁶ I applied this strategy to my film.

¹⁶ Bresson, Robert. 1975. *Notes on the Cinematographer*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 13.

However, and despite the busy shooting schedule, I was keen to make every shot look beautiful in terms of composition, lighting, and blocking. We took the necessary time to make every shot the way I wanted with no compromise in visual aesthetics or the cast's performance. I am really grateful to my talented director of photography, Alex Granger, and his crew for their persistence in doing the best possible job despite the constraints of time, and for creating a remarkable low-key lighting that underlined the story's dramatic goals and emphasized the tone of the film.

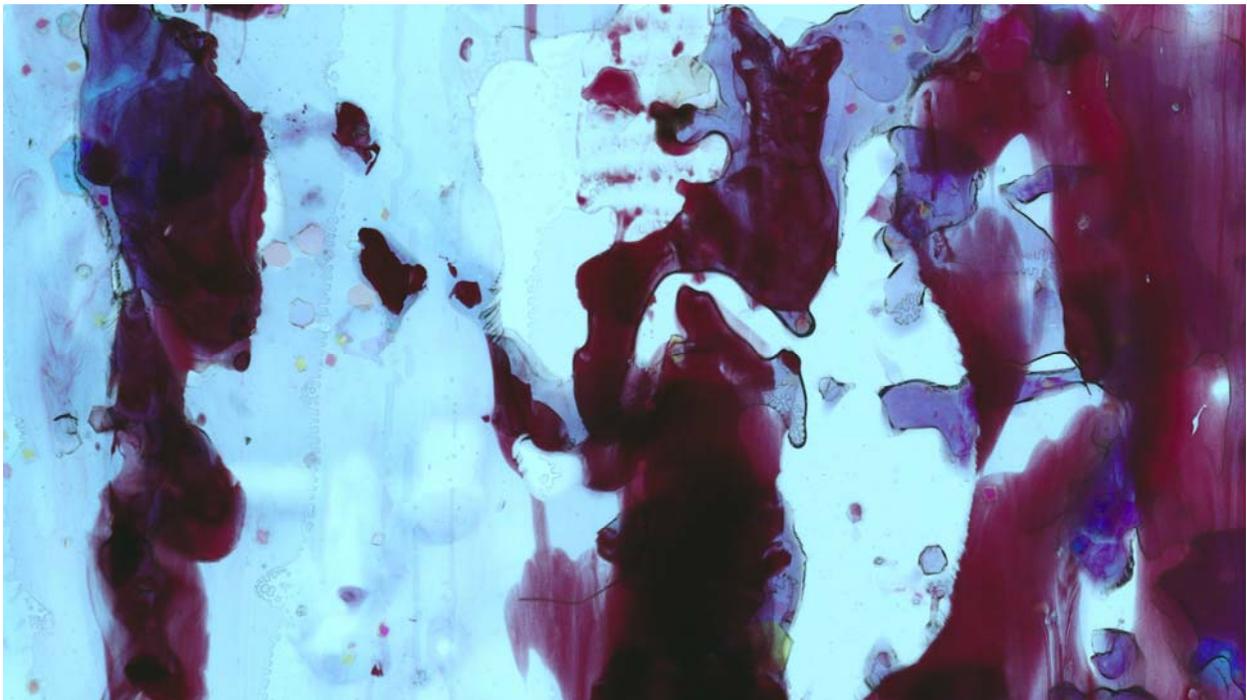


*Image 6: The Syrian bride: A still image from the film COLOR CORRECTION.
Nour, Ahmed Color correction, (2020)*

It was shot in black and white, with a few scenes in color. The high contrast black and white was meant to give the film a stylized unrealistic look, and to convey the insecurity of the characters. The interference of color was used in the flashback scenes to Syria, and in the surrealist intercuts where the woman experienced visual hallucinations of her former partner.

Intercutting between color and B&W was meant to illustrate the inner conflict of the Syrian protagonist as she experiences a difficult life transition as a refugee who suffers traumatic audio-visual hallucinations. As a result, I found Color Correction a suitable title for the final picture.

In addition, I painted a 16mm film reel with the same nail polish that was used in filming the nail polish scene, and scanned the reel to get the texture of the nail polish splatters on screen. The footage of the polish was used as a visual motif in the beginning and the ending sequences of the film.



*Image 7: Nail polish paint on 16 mm film- A still image from the film COLOR CORRECTION.
Nour, Ahmed Color correction, (2020)*

ART DIRECTION

One of the challenges of this project was finding suitable locations. As for the marriage agency, I'm grateful to my cinematographer for making his father's spacious office available for our shoot, and to his father, Brian Hanna, for the sincere help and generous support.

Nevertheless, the main challenge was the husband's apartment, since it is where most of the scenes take place. After a long search, our production manager/production designer found an apartment that was completely furnished with Egyptian furniture. The apartment owner is an Egyptian lady who brought all her furniture from Egypt to Canada on a ship. The furniture is made in Damietta, an Egyptian port city famous for its furniture industry.



*Image 8: The husband's apt. - A still image from the film COLOR CORRECTION.
Nour, Ahmed Color correction, (2020)*

In addition, my wife travelled to Egypt to purchase some necessary props that were used in dressing the apartment, but most of the props were brought by our production designer.

I am grateful to our production designer, Chrysanthi Zora Michealides, for her great efforts in finding this apartment, and for the remarkable set-dressing which made the locations look very close to the Egyptian interiors. This was a very important element in the film. I am also very grateful to the apartment owner, Lobna Mansour, for hosting us and making her apartment and her personal art collections available for the film's use.

SOUND

Sound shouldn't be considered extraneous in filmmaking. Films are an audiovisual medium that exploits the capacities of both image and sound. In my previous work, I have always tried to deploy sound as an essential dramatic and aesthetic tool in my storytelling.

The sound design of this film was mostly realistic, unlike my previous feature film, MOUG, where sound design was mostly experimental.

The challenge of the sound design in this film was to find suitable sound effects, room tones, and ambiences that would match the soundscape of Egypt. It was also necessary to clean up the ventilation sounds produced by the heating systems which don't exist in Egypt.

I used experimental non-diegetic sound in the scenes which demonstrated the protagonist's hallucinations and flashbacks. I am grateful to my talented sound designer, Matt Hearn, for his hard work in working the Foley and the mix of this film.

MUSIC

French filmmaker Robert Bresson wrote in his notes, “Music takes up all the room and gives no increased value to the image to which it is added”¹⁷

In my view, music shouldn’t be used to impose specific feelings on audience, nor should it add value to the image. However, it can be used as an auditory layer that strengthens the atmosphere of the scene as well as temporal transitions and film credits as long as it doesn’t steal attention from other elements.

Usually, my tendency is to use limited music in my work, and in this film, I wanted to rely more on the diegetic sound effects and silence. The extended silent gaps between the economic dialogue lines were crucial in highlighting the anxiety of the characters and the awkwardness of the situations.

Music was used on four occasions, two of them were inevitable due to seeing the protagonists listening to music, a third occasion was to accompany the end credits, and the fourth was a brief use for a temporal transition. All four tracks were almost free of dramatization.

¹⁷ Bresson, Robert. 1975. *Notes on the Cinematographer*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 28.

STYLE

The style of any film is determined by several factors, the most important is the story. Although some filmmakers have their own significant styles manifested in common cinematic techniques in each one's own body of work, like a preference for using long takes or improvisational dialogue, this shouldn't be confused with each film's own tone or style.

American film director Sidney Lumet wrote in his book "Making Movies,"

"Good style, to me, is unseen style. It is a style that is felt. The style of Kurosawa's *Ran* is totally different from the style of *The Seven Samurai* or Kurosawa's *Dreams*. And yet they are certainly Kurosawa's movies"¹⁸

A filmmaker does research to determine the form their story will take. This form aims to have a desired dramatic impact on viewers--deploying the visual and auditory tools of cinema, and exploiting the talents of the cast and crew. Nevertheless, the form must conform to the available budget and the production timeline terms.

To conclude this section, the form of this film was based on a set of film aesthetics that would help the story stand out. At the same time, could be achieved within the constraints of time, budget, and the obstructions listed in the introduction of this paper.

¹⁸ Lumet, Sidney. 1996. *Making movies*. New York: Vintage Books, 52.

INFLUENCES

I can't claim that I was inspired by a specific film or a specific filmmaker in making this film. However, my research included many inspiring films which were relevant to my film's formal and contextual properties; each film/filmmaker was a reference to one or more areas of interest such as: long-takes, B&W cinematography, low-key lighting, writing credible dialogue, single-location films, odd couple stories, directing actors, creating complex characters, controversial film ending, traumatized protagonist, anti-hero character.

As for the use of long takes technique, Russian filmmaker **Andrei Tarkovsky** is one of the pioneers. Films like **The Mirror**, **The Sacrifice**, **Andrei Rublev**, and **Stalker** are extraordinary examples of the magic of poetic cinema.

Hungarian filmmaker **Bela Tarr** is another master of long takes, films like **The Turin Horse** and **Satantango** were among my visual references for the targeted black and white cinematography which he often uses in his films.

Austrian director **Michael Haneke** is also a master of long takes, and while his style tends more towards static shots, Tarkovsky and Bela Tarr use more complex camera movements and extreme long takes. Haneke's brilliant film **The White Ribbon** was also among my references for the black and white cinematography and the long take technique.

Danish filmmaker **Bille August's** films **Pelle the conqueror** and **The Best Intentions** were remarkable references to the long-take technique, and also directing actors.

Swedish filmmaker **Ingmar Bergman** is absolutely a master screenwriter, his films **Winter Light** and **Persona** were also among my references in creating complex characters, and black and white cinematography.

Japanese filmmaker **Hiroshi Teshigahara** is also a master of cinema despite his relatively small body of work. His masterpiece **Woman in The Dunes** was a very important reference. It is almost filmed entirely in one location, featuring mainly two protagonists, a man and a woman, who are stuck in a very awkward situation that forces them to develop a strange relationship.

Belgian filmmaker **Chantal Akerman's** film: **Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels**, was an inspiring reference. The three and half-hours film, was shot mostly in an apartment, using static long-takes and featuring two main characters. The female lead is a very well dramatically designed character, and the film's ending is extremely powerful.

Italian filmmaker **Ettore Scola's** film **A special Day** was a reference for stories that occur in a single location and within intensive period of time. The story unfolds over the course of one day. A man and a woman engage in a series of conversations in the building where they both live, while all their neighbours are out to receive Hitler, who is paying a visit to Fascist Italy.

Japanese master **Shohei Imamura's** film **The Ballad of Narayama** was a reference for long takes cinema, and his film **The Eel** was a good reference for complex characters--it features a traumatized protagonist who is released from prison and must come to terms with his new community, while his past keeps chasing him.

Thai filmmaker **Apichatpong Weerasethakul's** films, **Tropical Malady** and **Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives**, were good references for the long-take technique. The latter deals

with the topic of memory and loss, and features audio-visual hallucinations in a very creative way.

Mexican filmmaker **Carlos Reygadas'** films, **Silent Light** and **Light After Darkness**, were also good examples of long-takes and minimal dialogue.

Turkish filmmaker **Nuri Bilge Ceylan** films **3 Monkeys** and **Once Upon A Time in Anatolia**, were good references for long-takes technique and stunning cinematography.

Danish filmmaker **Lars Von Trier's** film **Europa**, and French filmmaker **Alain Resnais'** film **Last Year at Marienbad** were both among my references for black and white cinematography as well.

As for acting performance and the craft of writing dialogue, Iranian art cinema was a strong reference. The significance of Iranian filmmakers is manifested in writing subtle dialogue and directing actors to deliver the most credible performances. The bodies of work of both filmmakers **Asghar Farhadi** and **Jafar Panahi** were on top of my references for writing dialogue, and directing actors.

Both filmmakers made films that feature strong female characters who try to survive in a patriarchal society that lacks equality and women rights. Films like **A Separation**, **About Elly**, **3 Faces**, and **The Circle**, are remarkable examples. Jafar Panahi's film **Crimson Gold** was one of my references for creating anti-hero male characters--the film features an ordinary looking delivery-man, who tries to save money to get married to his beloved woman, but cruel reality drives him to crime, and yet the viewers still root for him.

All the above-mentioned films and filmmakers were useful references and impactful influences on me, not only in this project, but also in my general perception of the art of filmmaking.

MY PREVIOUS WORK

I came to the MFA program after twelve years of working in the Egyptian film industry. I worked on a few mainstream films and a TV. series as assistant director. I also wrote, produced and directed several films as a filmmaker. Most of my work as a director was in the documentary film genre for both cinema and TV streams, but I don't consider myself a director of a specific genre since my tendency is to use each genre's techniques and aesthetics when appropriate for the story. I would probably say that I have more interest in Hybrid cinema as it allows more freedom in moving between multiple genres and deploying various techniques in the very same work. My previous feature film **Moug**¹⁹ was an example of Hybrid films that integrated documentary, fiction, animation, and experimental footages.



Image 9: A still from MOUG - Nour, Ahmed Moug, (2013)

¹⁹ 2013. *Waves*. Directed by Ahmed Nour.

My experience working in documentary films was useful in making my fiction thesis film. Documentary filmmaking requires patience, persistence, and the ability to strike creative solutions for the inevitable technical and logistical problems produced by the uncertainty of the plot and the vague production timeline. And even though my thesis film was a fiction, the production circumstances invoked uncertainties which I wouldn't be able to overcome if I didn't encounter similar challenges in my previous documentary projects.

CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges, I have learnt a lot on the journey of my thesis project. In fact, the obstructions were stimuli for creative ideas and innovative solutions, which at many times, offered more efficiency in telling the story. And though I am proud of my experience in this project, I am sure that every single day, a lot of filmmakers in every part of the world, overcome much bigger challenges by their struggle, creativity, and great passion for this form of art.

As I reach the end of this paper, I would like to refer to **Francois Truffaut's** masterpiece **Day For Night**. This beautiful film depicts the struggle of a filmmaker who tries to complete his film despite all the crises that keep occurring. It is a brilliant portrait of the interconnected personal and professional worlds of film people who sacrifice and strive to give birth to their films. And finally, let me end with a quote from the film, said by Truffaut who played the filmmaker himself,

“Making a film is like a stagecoach ride in the old west. When you start, you are hoping for a pleasant trip. By the halfway point, you just hope to survive.”²⁰

²⁰ 1973. *Day for night*. Directed by Francois Truffaut.

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