

## CINEMA OF CONSTRAINTS: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA FROM AND ABOUT IRAN AND THE ARAB WORLD

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This paper is work-in-progress for a book which develops a new approach to freedom of expression in contemporary cinema from and about Iran and the Arab world.<sup>1</sup> It explores the risks and constraints that underlie and shape independent filmmaking of various types, from fictional and documentary feature films designed for theatrical release to made-for-TV documentaries and short films uploaded onto the Internet.

Much existing scholarship on freedom of expression in cinema deals exclusively with censorship. However, censorship is only one means of control. The term 'constraint' has the advantage of bringing attention to the variety of obstacles facing filmmakers: the whole political economy, not just representation, that stands behind processes of image-making. To demonstrate this approach, I will be drawing on social theorist Jon Elster's work on constraints and film scholar Mette Hjort's writings on risk in filmmaking as well as my interviews with filmmakers.<sup>2</sup>

In some countries, freedom of expression is guaranteed in domestic law or by ratification of international treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.<sup>3</sup> Freedom of expression laws exist in Middle Eastern countries – and many of them, with the notable exceptions of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman, have ratified this Covenant. However, just because countries have signed up to these international norms does not mean that they uphold them. Reporters Without Borders' annual survey of press freedom maps the situation on the ground in different countries through colour-coding from 'very bad' in black through to 'bad' in red, 'problematic' in orange, 'fairly good' in yellow and 'good' in cream.<sup>4</sup> According to this survey, the Middle East is the

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<sup>2</sup> Jon Elster, *Ulysses Unbound: Studies in Rationality, Precommitment and Constraints* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jon Elster, 'Conventions, Creativity, Originality', in *Rules and Conventions: Literature, Philosophy, Social Theory*, ed. Mette Hjort (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992); Mette Hjort, 'Introduction: The Film Phenomenon and How Risk Pervades It' and 'Flamboyant Risk Taking: Why Some Filmmakers Embrace Avoidable and Excessive Risks' in *Film and Risk*, ed. Mette Hjort (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) defines freedom of expression as 'Freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media.' Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> Reporters Without Borders' annual survey of press freedom is available at <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

world's worst region for press freedom, due to prevalent conflict and crisis as well as increasing Internet surveillance and censorship.

The complexity missing from the map and media coverage of the region as a crisis 'hotspot' can be seen in the work of filmmakers who try to lend greater specificity to images of crisis. Many filmmakers lay store in creativity as a medium of change, opening up different forms of engagement. For them, freedom of expression is a lived, embodied experience. As Marwan Kraidy says, freedom is not 'a mere word' distanced from its 'actual consequences'; it is a material practice, carried out in public where bodies are literally imperilled.<sup>5</sup> My project includes several categories of filmmakers, each facing different degrees of risk and corresponding range of free expression: filmmakers from the West, who trade positions of relative safety to make films in the Middle East; exiles who have left their country and cannot return; filmmakers based in the region, risking arrest and persecution; and filmmakers of dual nationality who move between these worlds. In my analysis, I try to take account of these different 'life worlds' and 'social safety-nets'.<sup>6</sup>

Middle Eastern cinema's ongoing acclaim at international film festivals suggests for some the paradox that political repression and crisis aid creativity. Rather, I have found that creativity often flourishes at periods when repression is loosened, or in the transition between one regime and another, like the brief 'window of freedom'<sup>7</sup> created by the so-called 'Arab Spring' when people were emboldened to speak out although the risks remained and indeed became greater as snipers targeted demonstrators, people were arrested, tortured and disappeared in large numbers and, in countries such as Syria, civilian areas were bombed in the governments' attempts to crush dissent, forcing many filmmakers into exile abroad. In Iran, the Green Movement, which brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets in protest at the disputed 2009 elections, can be regarded as a precursor of the Arab revolts – a symptom of long-term discontent and, likewise, violently repressed.

It is common-sensical to think that more options are better than less – indeed, Jon Elster reminds us to steer clear of overly praising constraints.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, as he suggests, some constraints have benefits. He illustrates his concept of 'self-binding' with Ulysses tying himself to his ship's mast to prevent himself being lured by the sirens. Nowadays we might think of the Freedom App, which frees you from Internet distractions to focus on the task at hand: simultaneous constraint

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<sup>5</sup> Marwan Kraidy, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 131.

<sup>6</sup> These terms are taken from Hjort, 'Flamboyant Risk Taking', 52.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Fahim, 'Creators Meet Censors: The Standoff between Creators and Censors in Post-2011 Egyptian Drama', *Cairo Review* 28 (2018): 95.

<sup>8</sup> Elster, *Ulysess*, 264.

and freedom. A budget is a limit on creative freedom, but sometimes a big budget can be disastrous for a film. Such restrictions force filmmakers to find inventive solutions to these challenges. For Elster, creativity is the ability to exercise choice within constraints, and succeeding within those restrictions.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, the constraints must not be too tight, leaving room for manoeuvre within them.

Developing this, my conceptual premises are: every film is a product of its constraints; constraints vary geographically and temporally; they leave material traces on creative strategies; and creative evolution occurs due to changes in constraints. In what follows, I reinterpret and expand the artistic constraints Elster identified in the light of filmmaking conditions in Iran and the Arab world. These include political, institutional, economic, technological, cultural, religious, linguistic, security-related, spatial, temporal, formal and stylistic constraints. Some of these will be recognizable to independent filmmakers everywhere, but others illuminate the regionally-specific relationship between creativity and constraint, as well as differences across the region. Instead of speaking about each of them, I will offer some thoughts on a selected range of constraints.

### **Political**

The *state*, with its security apparatus (army, police, intelligence agencies), judiciary and embassies, plays a key role determining what types of cinematic expression are allowed within a country through its legislation and forms of patronage. It can impose restrictions, and exert pressure upon filmmakers, exhibitors and critics alike – actions that signal the range of free expression in the country and what regard the state has for it. In many countries, filmmakers must submit a synopsis and/or script and list of cast and crew for shooting approval as well as gain a screening permit. Filmmakers sometimes get around these restrictions by presenting a different version of their script from the one they intend to film.

Aside from the state, *political factions* have the power to make things difficult for filmmakers and *lobby groups* can launch a campaign against a film. Within the region, there are certain topics – typically, opposition to ruling elites and official corruption – considered red lines not to be crossed. But the main pressure is to promote official images and narratives of the country. The Iranian media use the phrase *siah-namaii* ('portraying the negatives') to express disapproval.<sup>10</sup> Ali Soozandeh, whose animated film *Tehran Taboo* (2017) was reported as anti-Iran or anti-Islamic in

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<sup>9</sup> Elster, *Ulysses*, 200.

<sup>10</sup> Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri, 'Iranian Documentary Filmmakers Association and the Fight for the House of Cinema' in *Iranian Cinema in a Global Context: Policy, Politics, and Form*, ed. Peter Decherney and Blake Atwood (New York: Routledge, 2015), 171.

the Iranian press, explained to me that ‘The picture we show to the outside [audience] must be a very clean, beautiful image, independent of what is behind it’.<sup>11</sup>

*Influential connections*, known in Arabic as *wastat*, are important in filmmaking anywhere, but having powerful contacts to intercede on your behalf is common practice in this region.

### **Institutional**

To have independent film, you have to have institutional support – cultural organisations that produce, fund, distribute and exhibit films and provide skills training: film schools, film institutes, production and distribution companies, cinema theatres, film festivals, galleries and television networks. Yet such institutions impose rules and expectations upon filmmakers in order to access their support. As the state-sponsored institutional framework has been dismantled or modified throughout the region, filmmakers have to compete in a market-led system that dominates much of the world. Lack of local distribution for independent Arab and Iranian films necessitates the targeting of international audiences via festivals, art cinema distribution, NGOs and TV networks, which have preferences and fashions for subjects they want to hear about – often bound up with stereotypes of the region, a pressure that many filmmakers find as significant as, if not greater than, state censorship. Along with a high demand for images of revolution and conflict, films deemed to be risk-taking are appealing to international festivals.<sup>12</sup> We can see this in the highly successful festival run of *Raving Iran* (2016), an underground documentary about Iran’s illegal rave scene made by German filmmaker Susanne Regina Meures, and the championing of Iranian director Jafar Panahi at Cannes. Since 2010, Panahi has officially been banned from filmmaking for 20 years yet, despite this, he has continued to make films, including *This is Not a Film* (2011), reportedly smuggled to Cannes in a USB stick hidden in a cake.

### **Economic**

Because film is generally an expensive medium, consuming vast labour and resources, some of the biggest constraints facing filmmakers are economic. Independent filmmakers from the region often rely on foreign funding, mainly from Western governments, TV networks and NGOs, but also regional NGOs.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, funding is affected by wider economic conditions and it often comes with strings attached. Yet filmmakers have proven they can work around funding criteria as

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with the author, 23 August 2018.

<sup>12</sup> This is also acknowledged by Hjort, ‘Introduction’, 15.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed description of the funding landscape in the Arab world, see Chapter One in Laura Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2015) and for Iran, where funding has largely remained within national borders due to government policies and initiatives, see Shahab Esfandiary, *Iranian Cinema and Globalization: National, Transnational and Islamic Dimensions* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012).

these are explicitly stated, unlike much state censorship which can be arbitrary and unpredictable. When Leila Sansour made *Open Bethlehem* (2014) her Western NGO funding stipulated that she could not be 'overtly political', so she used tourism as a cover for her campaign to save the city of Bethlehem from Israel's Separation Wall, which effectively highlighted the issues, as Bethlehem's economy depends on tourism, yet, due to the Wall, tourist numbers have dwindled.<sup>14</sup>

The Lebanon-based NGO Bidayyat was founded during the Syrian revolution specifically to 'protect' emerging filmmakers from rules imposed by film and TV markets and let them develop their ideas 'more freely ... with small budgets and alternative artistic practices'.<sup>15</sup> However, because the grants are small, filmmakers shoulder a substantial amount of the cost themselves or have to patch together funding from multiple sources. For example, for his film *300 Miles*, Orwa Al-Mokdad succeeded in getting funding from Bidayyat and the British Council but, in the four years it took to make, the film cost \$50,000 and he had to personally finance half of it.<sup>16</sup>

### Technological

The advent of video and digital technology, social networking sites and the Internet has made filmmaking cheaper and more accessible. It has given rise to underground and independent filmmaking in places where previously filmmakers were reliant on the state for hiring expensive equipment, such as in Syria and Iran. By 'underground films', I mean films shot illegally, without official permits, at the risk of being arrested, and these films are distributed abroad or on the black market. However, the digital domain does not simply remove barriers to free expression; it imposes further constraints.

Meures's documentary *Raving Iran* (2016), like Bahman Ghobadi's fiction film *No One Knows about Persian Cats* (2009), is about the underground music scene in Iran, featuring real musicians and shot undercover. We follow two Iranian DJs, Anoosh and Arash. This scene at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (responsible for arts regulation in Iran) was filmed with an iPhone hidden in Arash's shirt pocket [clip]. The filmmakers only had one chance to shoot the scene and could not return to the location again, making the filmmaking process highly stressful.<sup>17</sup> There was always the danger of being found out and being imprisoned because filming without a permit is illegal.

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<sup>14</sup> *Open Bethlehem* (2014) is funded by the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace and other NGOs, Dubai Entertainment and Media Organization (which organizes the Dubai International Film Festival), individual donations and Sansour's freelance work for ITN.

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Hodgins, 'Imagination Is Power: How Bidayyat Captures Syria on Film', 11 April 2018, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/imagination-is-power-syria-on-film-with-bidayyat>

<sup>16</sup> Interview with the author, 8 August 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with the author, 25 September 2018.

Bidayyat makes many of its films freely available online, underpinned by its agenda to use the internet as a platform for creative and political dissent, make films accessible and reach Arab youth and Syrian audiences dispersed around the world. However, these tend to be short films, rather than the feature films it supports whose primary distribution network is festivals. While free online distribution allows filmmakers to bypass state censors and other gatekeepers, it does not allow them to recoup their costs.

Donatella Della Ratta describes the Internet as the site of a power-struggle between 'image-makers' and 'image-keepers', such as Google and Facebook, whose 'terms of service ... count for more than freedom of speech'.<sup>18</sup> Image-keepers retain ownership of the images and can dismantle them at any time. For example, a lot of footage from the early, peaceful phase of the Syrian revolution has been deleted from YouTube as if it 'never existed'.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, communications technologies, including electricity and phone networks as well as Internet, all of which affect filmmaking, are frequently disrupted in the Middle East for reasons that are political as well as technical: sanctions, blockade, conflict, corruption, and state interference.

### **Cultural**

The cultural constraints that filmmakers face come from both within and outside the region. One source of constraints within the region are *social norms and customs*, largely relating to gender and sexuality. During the filming of *Wadjda* (2012) in Saudi Arabia, Haifa Al-Mansour directed outdoor scenes by walkie-talkie from a van in order to respect cultural rules about public space and gender segregation, and not be seen publicly interacting with her male crew.

When Middle Eastern art is brought to the West, it is usually viewed under the lens of cultural otherness, including *stereotypes of Islam and Arabs* such as oppressed and victimised women. As Egyptian filmmaker Mohamed Siam puts it, people here often have 'a very medieval idea about Islam'.<sup>20</sup> This affects the narratives and images that get endorsed for public circulation. The appeal of stories about Islamic terrorism means there is less interest in other topics, which distorts public perceptions and serves political agendas. When Sara Afshar was seeking support for a documentary about enforced disappearance under the Syrian regime, it was in 2014 when ISIS

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<sup>18</sup> Donatella Della Ratta, *Shooting A Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 176.

<sup>19</sup> Donatella Della Ratta, "'The Unbearable Lightness of Images": The Aesthetics, Economics, and Politics of Post-2011 Filmmaking in Syria', Histories of Arab Documentary Conference, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München Institut für Kunstgeschichte & Filmmuseum/Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich, 27-29 October 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with the author, 31 May 2018.

had become prominent in international perceptions of the Syrian conflict. Due to lack of interest in regime atrocities, she decided to set up her own production company and investigate on her own.<sup>21</sup>

## Security

Security risks are a major challenge to filmmaking in the region, many of them exceeding the 'inevitable risks' that generally occur when a film is made.<sup>22</sup> Under conditions of war, it is not always possible to have direct access to events and document them in person. Because of difficulties of filming in war-torn Syria, US-based Syrian filmmaker Sam Kadi directed his documentary *Little Gandhi* (2016) over Skype from Turkey, relying on activists on the ground to operate the camera and sound equipment, and to smuggle the footage across the border.<sup>23</sup>

According to Orwa Al-Mokdad, the destruction and atrocities of the war have returned freedom of expression in Syria to what it was before the revolution: 'almost non-existent'.<sup>24</sup> Even during the so-called peaceful phase of the revolution, filming took place in the face of death from snipers and militias. For safety reasons, anonymous filmmaking was 'not a choice, but a necessity' for those inside Syria, while those who left 'can now sign and claim their work'.<sup>25</sup>

Although both filmmakers and their participants are vulnerable, risk is unevenly distributed, often disadvantaging participants who remain in the danger zones. In *Those Who Remain* (2016), Lebanese filmmaker Eliane Raheb's documentary about the Akkar region on the Lebanese border, feared to be the doorway for a potential ISIS invasion from Syria, the protagonist Haykal points out to her, 'you are doing your interview and you will leave .... We will remain here!'

The risks attached to a film extend to the afterlife of the film in distribution. A documentary can become increasingly dangerous over time as its national and international visibility enhances the risks for its participants, as Yasmin Fedda told me about her film *Queens of Syria* (2014). In this documentary, Syrian refugee women in Jordan perform an adaptation of Euripides's *The Trojan Women*, drawing parallels between the play's themes of war crimes and exile and their own lives.<sup>26</sup> Some women had strong parallels with the play but these were too sensitive to be included in the film, which has greater exposure than a stage play. The women feared repercussions for their families still in Syria and also for themselves if they returned to Syria while Assad was still in power. Therefore, Fedda created three versions of the film, reflecting the anticipated level of risk

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with the author, 19 September 2018.

<sup>22</sup> See Hjort, 'Flamboyant Risk Taking', which distinguishes between 'inevitable risk' and 'excessive risks'.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with the author, 13 March 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with the author, 8 August 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Hodgins, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with the author, 4 October 2016.

from each target audience: a festival version, a Middle East version and a TV version for BBC Arabic.

### Formal and stylistic constraints

*Imposed stylistic constraints* come from external sources such as expectations of the production company, exhibition platform and target audience. Filmmakers from the region face the delicate balancing act of addressing multiple audiences at once: the local and diaspora audience, which is conversant with the discourses but possibly sensitive to taboo topics; and the international audience, unfamiliar with the context, which binds filmmakers to expectations of 'explaining' their part of the world like a tour guide.<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 1. *In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (dir. Larissa Sansour, UK, Denmark, Qatar, 2015)

On the other hand, *chosen stylistic constraints* consist of pre-existing conventions and invented constraints. Genre falls into this category if it is chosen by the filmmaker as their expressive medium rather than proposed by the production company. Science fiction conventions are chosen stylistic constraints in artist-filmmaker Larissa Sansour's work – for example, *In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015) (Fig. 1). Sansour's premise is that Palestinian reality is stranger than reality and merits not a realist or documentary approach but science-fiction treatment. Therefore, any topic that she and her co-director Søren Lind want to address about the Israel-Palestine conflict, such as the politicized use of archaeology, they 'drop' into a science-fiction framework.<sup>28</sup>

*Invented constraints* occur when artists devise their own rules and limitations to which they will abide in their work. Elster explains the thinking behind this as reducing the possible options to a

<sup>27</sup> Lina Khatib makes a similar point in her study of the Lebanese film industry, 'Lebanese Cinema and the Representation of the War', in *Film in the Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence*, ed. Josef Gugler (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 143.

<sup>28</sup> Søren Lind, 'Spicing Up Sci-Fi: The Dunes Strike Back', Panel Discussion, The British Library, London, 28 April 2018.

manageable amount so as to stimulate creativity. Danish director Lars von Trier is a champion of this approach, as exemplified by the Dogme '95 movement which he led, laying down ten filmmaking rules for filmmakers to follow.<sup>29</sup> Dogme 95's self-imposed constraints, designed to avoid the temptations of ornate and costly filmmaking, are very much in the spirit of Elster's notion of self-binding.

Some Middle Eastern filmmakers, especially those with an experimental bent, have also invented their own constraints, such as Rana Eid who says, 'If we don't have a challenge in this film, let's create one!'<sup>30</sup> In her documentary *Panoptic*, which explores the unresolved legacy of Lebanon's Civil War, she determined that she would only use reflected sound on location in order to convey the atmosphere of detention centres and former torture chambers through their sound qualities.

### **Creative strategies then and now**

At times of repression, there tends to be a preference for fiction which, to some extent, provides a shield against punishment, compared to documentary, a more direct form which, in authoritarian contexts, tends to arise at times of relatively greater freedom.<sup>31</sup> Allegory has formed the dominant framework for interpreting this fiction cinema, a mode of interpretation that goes hand-in-hand with the emphasis on censorship, its impetus being to study how filmmakers evade the censors through symbolism and metaphor, 'smuggling' in contentious ideas in this manner. The Cold War paradigm of the dissident artist is a key influence here, as Angus Fletcher's statement in *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* suggests, 'In times of political oppression we may get "Aesop language" to avoid the censorship of dissident thought.'<sup>32</sup> Allegory 'says one thing and means another'.<sup>33</sup> As a creative strategy, it fits the idea of a state-sponsored industry that cultivates aesthetic obliqueness but struggles to account for the variety of constraints facing filmmakers.

I believe that allegory no longer encapsulates the creative strategies emerging from Iran and the Arab world. As Elster states, 'Whereas constraints arise by necessity or choice, conventions [or

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<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the use of constraints in Lars von Trier's work, see Hector Rodriguez, 'Constraint, Cruelty and Conversation' in *Dekalog 1: On The Five Obstructions*, ed. Mette Hjort (London: Wallflower, 2008), 38-56.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with the author, 8 August 2018.

<sup>31</sup> This is not, however, the case in Iran where, until 2009, documentaries (along with short films) were not subjected to the same censorship procedures as fictional features, on the assumption their audiences were smaller.

<sup>32</sup> Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), 22.

<sup>33</sup> Fletcher, 2.

creative strategies] *evolve*'.<sup>34</sup> Today, the range of creative strategies, from witnessing to science fiction, is wider than allegory, and has evolved with the constraints. These creative strategies are, moreover, frequently more direct, depending on the degree of risk to which filmmakers are exposed and range of free expression in the context in which they're working.

One example of how particular constraints generate aesthetic conventions is the use of animation in human rights reporting. *The Green Wave* (2010) uses animations of state brutality and torture within the format of a feature documentary, mixing mobile phone footage of demonstrations, interviews and excerpts from online blogs, to portray the Green Movement in Iran (Fig. 2). The filmmakers are Ali Samadi Ahadi and Ali Soozandeh, Iranians based in Germany. The art director Ali Soozandeh explained to me that the problems facing the production team were how to create engaging characters from the existing footage and their lack of budget for live action re-enactment.<sup>35</sup> With the expressive capabilities of animation, they could compensate for poor-quality mobile phone footage and vividly dramatize the stories in the non-visual content (blogs and tweets). Furthermore, animation overcame the constraints of censorship arising from the Iranian government's suppression of discourse around the events and certain punishment faced by witnesses in Iran if they openly testified.



Fig. 2. *The Green Wave* (dir. Ali Samadi Ahadi, Germany, 2012)

Jalal Maghout's animated short *Suleima* (2014) was produced by a Syrian feminist online organization Estayqazat ('she has awoken') which interviewed Syrian women, commissioned animations of their testimonies, and posted them on its YouTube channel [clip]. This type of film allows the filmmakers and viewers to enter into risky locations through the imagined world created by animation. The animation also protects the identities of the subjects who are at risk. The character upon whom *Suleima* is based was a revolutionary, then still based in Syria, her appearance and voice altered for her safety.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Elster, *Ulysses*, 275.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with the author, 23 August 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with the author, 4 May 2016.

## Conclusion

Constraints shape all kinds of filmmaking but filmmakers face situations of 'persistent' and 'pervasive' risk and constraint when they make films in and about the Middle East. These constraints set the *range of free expression* under which filmmakers operate. Some constraints are manageable and indeed stimulating to their creativity but become harmful when they are too tight or mixed with extreme risk. Furthermore, as the constraints change, so do the creative strategies that filmmakers use to overcome them, resulting in new forms of cinematic expression.

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