

## 1.2 Revolution Transcription

### Backpack Journalism

Thank you so much for joining us today! We are very excited to have you here for this interview, the master class later and the film screening tonight. The first question I have for you revolves around the concept of backpack journalism. Basically it allows any citizen to pick up a camera and become a journalist because everybody has their own story to tell. How has that affected the Arab Revolution and what triggered you and Omar to make your film.

We aren't backpack journalists, we are professional filmmakers, and there is a difference. Backpack journalism is really the democratization of image making and story telling. I think it had a very big impact on all of the Arab Spring moments because a lot of time the mainstream media, instead of covering a story in an objective way, is usually trying to spin a story in a certain way and I think there was a bit of uncertainty as how to spin it. A lot of the time, especially in the early days of the Revolutions – Tunisia, Libya and Egypt – most of the news was getting out to people through YouTube or Twitter when the Internet was working. Of course after the Internet, after the Revolution more and more material is still coming out; we still have various angles on different events that happened that was or wasn't covered by the media mainly not covered by the media particularly well. So people on the ground, people with cell phones, people with cameras this is what the real eye on the street is. Whether you want to call it journalism or just being an eyewitness to something certainly had a profound effect on people because its really where you go to find the truth is that immediacy. Finding a clip that was posted on the Internet five minutes ago is better than turning on the TV in many cases. Certainly there were many events that happened that the media completely ignored that had profound effect on the Revolution and the movement of the Revolution because it really was happening minute by minute. When I was filming I noticed it was probably the most photographed Revolution in history because you would have 100,000 people in any given area and 30-40,000 cameras. Everybody is walking around with their cell phone; of course you have to wonder where does all that material go? I would say probably 80% of it is stuff you can't make either heads or tails of. Obviously we've seen a lot of clips of protestors being shot or killed filmed from afar or surreptitiously from balconies and stuff like that. So that eyewitness, immediacy events, that probably aren't appropriate for mainstream media have a place through the Internet and through YouTube. It's very important that people have cameras because they are really our only weapon against police brutality, against tear gas, against totalitarian police states and corrupt police states. Obviously the media inside Egypt, the state media, is spinning a completely different story than the foreign media is and the people on the street are somehow caught in the middle. It's very important people continue to film because it's the only way we can catch them doing bad things to people. It's been quite successful. People have been able to rally around particular media, particular footage that did come out of these Revolutions as proof of the dictatorships and brutality that they were protesting against and that really is particularly well represented in the mainstream news.

### Film Evolved into Documentary

It was interesting for me to watch it because everything that I'd seen on it was of course what I'd seen on the news. Like you said, the news shows these events through a totally different lens than from how people on the ground, actual citizens see it. Given the fact that you were downtown, right in the middle of everything, did you start recording with the thought that you were going to make a film out of this or did you start recording for your own personal reasons?

We knew it was coming. We knew it was coming because of what was happening in Tunisia. We knew it was inevitable that it would come to Egypt. We didn't know when, we didn't know what form, we knew it was going to come but we didn't have a lot of hope it would break through and succeed. We thought there would be some protests but of course we didn't know what the outcome would be. I had worked on a couple of films in 2008 called *Egypt We Are Watching You*. There was an effort to get people out on the street but there was a massive secret police and army presence that really just stamped it out. I had experience with that; I had experience filming that and being intimidated and really seeing these security services at work. I was a bit guardedly pessimistic about the form of the protest that would come to Egypt. Nevertheless we were ready for something. We had our cameras on the desk, charged before January 25<sup>th</sup> in case anything would happen we knew we needed to get out there and start filming from the first series of events and that's really what we did. We knew we wanted to make a film but we didn't know what form it would come in. It just organically happened and for me this is how to do a documentary. A documentary is about documenting events that are happening, not reconstructing things, not interviewing people about things that have happened in the past, this is not interesting for me even though it's become the standard way of making a documentary. It involves writing a script, it involves doing research, it involves a lot of sculpting of the story before you even start to film and to me that's not documentary that's docudrama or whatever you want to call it. We knew we had to be in the right place at the right time, but we also had a problem because, for me, I was figuring it out. I usually like to tell these stories from a very personal point of view. It was happening so quickly we didn't have the ability to actually find characters; we had to become the characters. We were stuck at home at night, there were a lot of conversations, a lot of emotions; I had to film that kind of stuff because I really didn't have anything else to do except freak out. Of course these were very intimate moments at home amongst our friends and people we care about and I think that evolved in to try to find some common ground between what was happening on the street and what was happening in the home. So that's really how it evolved.

### Personal Motivation

Regarding what we do, we have the same kind of motivation. My motivation to film was really as an obligation – I'm an Egyptian, I'm well educated, I know how to use a camera, I know how to edit it, I know how to get the material out, I know how to make a film and that's a very privileged place to be in a country like Egypt where you have such poverty and illiteracy; a terrible education system. I would say my skill set and my abilities are beyond most people's abilities. Not to say they don't

have talent, they just don't have access to the material, the camera and the ability to use it effectively. With that said, there is a whole generation, a young crop of filmmakers coming out of Egypt who are learning the camera, they know there are stories all around them. This was a trend before the Revolution but certainly with the Revolution we've seen a massive explosion and expression and questioning things that were perhaps taboo before or out of the scope of consideration for young people to get into, and that's really great. We went out there to film to basically document what was happening, we didn't know what was going to happen with it, we didn't know we were making a movie about it, we just knew we had to be in the right place at the right time to capture whatever was happening around us and certainly by living downtown it was certainly easy because everything was happening around my house. Then it started to evolve into the possibility that we might have a film. We didn't really know what course that would take. I had intuition that it was somehow connected to our families, our circle of friends around us and try to tell our story and personalize our experience. The Revolution is a huge animal, it's an ocean of stories; its very difficult to define what it is to people in one sitting, in one film because it can mean so many things to so many different people. By personalizing it we made it our story, a human story full of emotions, ups and downs and I think that was the most important thing about the film is to create a personal frame so people can access this huge monster we call the Revolution but in a very personal, intimate way.

### Security Issues

What was it like for you whenever you were walking around with your camera and there was a very big chance that you could be arrested or something worse happening to you? There was a point in the film when you said "these guys are undercover they've been following us, stay with the group." Can you comment more on security in Egypt and how it's affected your filmmaking?

You have to be careful, especially in these moments. The upheaval and the chaos and the amount of people in the street was actually amazing cover for us. There was no way for them to single us out and even if they did there was no way for them to grab us on the street because there was just too many people and they are very aware of secret police. The protestors were very encouraging for us, they were like film, film, show the world what is happening! That emboldened us and empowered us. Of course there were many tense moments where you're not quite sure where the crowd is going to go, who are they. Of course inside the crowd there are many provocateurs, thugs and secret police and people filming us filming. That's why we had to wear our scarves really to hide our identities. Also to be clever about where the camera is; sometimes it's hidden in a bag or scarf and it's not obvious. Many times we had to resort to our iPhones or whatever was available to film so that we didn't look like professional filmmakers with big cameras. It was great because you can blend into the crowd, you don't stick out. I'm 6'4" and I look like a Viking so I stick out anyway. But the fact is if you are holding a phone you can get away with a lot more intimate footage than if you are holding a big camera. I think as technology progresses and cameras get smaller and smaller we are going to actually see a lot more intimate and compelling footage come out as a result of that. This film is one

small example, or lets say the beginning of that trend, personalizing moments that are exceptional or historical is through your phone. Just by virtue that it's your personal communication device makes that footage very personal.

### Family vs. Filming

So we could get away with a lot but as things settled down and in the transitional period certainly there was a lot more awareness about clamping down on footage. Even just before we had left, part of my paranoia because I was certainly paranoid and lots of people were paranoid as well, it was justified. We had friends who'd been followed home, who's hard drives had been confiscated, who's cameras had been broken, who got pulled aside, who's bags were checked, got arrested, lost footage. Of course the more footage that we accrued the more paranoid I would get because it become more and more dangerous to be caught with so much material and obviously with all the effort we put in we didn't want to lost our material, our tapes and stuff like that. There is kind of a fine line between making a movie and living your life. First we are living our life and second making a film. We're not journalists, we're not engaged in the activism of the Revolution even though we are pro-Revolution. My main concern was my family, my friends and the safety of us then secondly the film. When we decided to leave we almost were abandoning the film, but we're also saving the film at the same time. I think a lot of journalists obviously would have stayed because that's their job. My job is really to take care of my family. Even when we left we filmed it. When we were in Europe we continued filming up until the fall of Mubarak which happened a week after we left. We certainly didn't know when he would fall or how he would fall. It could have been weeks, it could have been months, it could have been a protracted violent struggle like what we see in Syria. We really had no idea what was going to happen so that's why we left. In terms of the security its always there, its always part of the filmmakers job especially in these types of countries where you have a police state and very high censorship and a lot of scrutiny for foreigners to do work in Egypt and countries like Egypt. But this is part of the excitement of making films there is trying to tell the secret stories and trying to get those stories out and access to untold stories and there are just thousands and thousands of them because of the censorship. That's what's exciting about it is going and finding a gem, finding a beautiful story that no one has heard about and just get it done. But you have to be very careful, sensitive; you can't just wonder out like a lost puppy with a big camera and expect to get amazing footage or not be stopped or questioned at least. You have to be very clever. That kind of training, I used to do photo journalist still photography, street photography, and that was good training for my video work. You have to be like a shadow, no one notices you that's the way you get stuff done.

### Balance of Emotions

How were to maintain a focus on the recordings, on the filmmaking while also having to balance your own emotions and also the emotions of everyone else around you; your loved ones, people closest to you?

Well I think we were doing something new in this film because we are really blurring the lines between observational documentary and first-person

autobiographical story. So its very interesting because when you hear the voices behind the camera you realize it's different people sometimes holding the camera but you can recognize the voice as one of the characters that you've known in front of the camera. So its becoming this revolving door where the line is being crossed we're not objective we are completely subjective, and I think that's where it becomes interesting. This is where we are bending the genre by breaking the rules. Usually you don't interact with your subject, you don't talk to your subject; just a fly on the wall filming your subject trying to make sure that they are not aware of the camera. This is a typical way of doing a veritae where you are simply an observer and there is no interaction. This we cross the line because we are telling our own story and we are subjectifying the material and personalizing the material without it becoming a video blog. We cut out all the times we talk to the camera, we took out all the conjecture and the projections and the political analysis, because that stuff really was not interesting, but it doesn't touch your emotions. So we just kept all the emotional scenes, all the emotional moments where people are truly free and not trying to present themselves to the camera and we caught many of these stolen moments. Which ones did we chose to edit, we just found our favorite scenes the most emotional scenes and started to string those together and try to find where the holes were and try to bridge the gaps between these major scenes that we liked. And so that's why it is interesting, it is a documentary; you are showing real life as it happens the audience is invited to experience what the character sees as they see it in an emotional frame. And that is the power of the film because there is no explanation to it because it's just happening. And that's really what happened in the Revolution. It's happening and erupting around us so quickly that we had no ability to make sense of it as it was happening. We just had to role with it and capture as many moments as possible.

## ½ Revolution

Why did you title the film *½ Revolution*? What is the reason behind that?

Basically, when we were editing the film, we realized that this Revolution was not complete with the fall of Mubarak. Mubarak was a dictator but he was really just window dressing for an entire regime that was just an entrenched regime; has a lot of reform to do. So we wanted Western audiences to kind of change their perception about what happened in Egypt. People were like its finished, Mubarak is out, the Revolution has succeeded, yay Egypt, yay Egyptian people! I think that was a bit too simplistic. Because of course in the media cycle, wrapped up good, dictator felled, done. Everything is fine. That was not something we wanted to perpetuate. Actually a lot of other films that came out after our film really focused on the success of deposing Mubarak. Which I felt was a really kind of a false ending. Yes it was great, yes it was euphoric, yes it was amazing but it's not completely accurate because it's the end of the story. So *½ Revolution* started to change people's perception of what was going on. Actually we saw people using the term *½ Revolution* to describe what was happening in Egypt especially under the military rule and transitional period. And that was quite effective. I think it also grabs people's attention because its challenging people's perceptions of what happened. I think if you can grab peoples attention like that then you got a good chance of telling

your story to them in a kind of new refreshing was than perhaps what they've been trained to think. That's really the power of documentary these days is that we're telling stories outside the scope of mainstream media. We're not constrained by 2 or 3-minute stories and sound bites and spin. We are able to go deeper into the story and explore the small details that are so often overlooked by traditional means, traditional television. So  $\frac{1}{2}$  Revolution, certainly it has that meaning, we were there for  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the Revolution. We're also half Egyptian, half American, half Danish, half Palestinian, half, half, half, half, half. We also wanted to express that as our particular characters. We are also embedded in that title. So it served many, many purposes to tell it  $\frac{1}{2}$  Revolution. Of course we want to be provocative in how we label our film and our film itself is provocative. So that I think was a good choice, because there has certainly been many  $\frac{1}{2}$  Revolutions in history. But I think nobody ever really coined that term until we did so that was important.

### Western Powers

People are quite aware that the dictator Hosni Mubarak was supported by America for 30 years. America is part of the problem in this case. So it's really not very shocking for me for people to know that fact. When they get their suspicions confirmed, it wasn't just the shotgun shells it was the CS gas and CF gas, all those nerve agents and things like this; these are all made in the USA. This is the proof. Event when David Cameron came down to Cairo along with some Western political leaders, who are really responsible for funding this oppression for 3 decades, they came down to save face. On the one hand they are saying they are so proud of the Egyptian people, they are looking for freedom and its aspirational and inspirational. But at the same time they are making military deals with the consul and selling fresh tear gas to them. People are very aware of this. I'm really kind of shocked that Americans are shocked that Egyptians are shocked about the involvement of Western powers to keep the people down.

### Effects of Film

Given the nature of the film, its effects, it's effects on you, your family and your friends. How has it changed you as a filmmaker and how you will continue your projects in the future?

Yeah, it's totally changed me. This film is sort of the dream movie to make in a sense. You get very rare opportunities in life to be in this situation, to be able to capture this material is very rare, very unique. But to be able to do it in real time, in veritae, is like the *crème-de-la-crème* the hardest thing to do in documentary filmmaking is to be there in the moment, capture the moment, have it framed up, get the sound, get the threads, the characters, the historical situation. It was like a perfect storm in sense. We had a lot of material to work with and it was a very challenging process but one we were very excited about because it was like "I'm making my dream movie!" even though I really didn't know what it was I just knew the material was there. This is special, this is unique this is not something we can reconstruct or we need to do interviews we were just capturing moments, very important ones. That was the dream come true but then to be able to bend the gender of what documentary is and to include ourselves in front of the camera and behind the

camera and weave this kind of subjective, objective, first-person, observational documentary and weave this all together into some kind of new genre or something that's pushing the genre forward into unfamiliar territory. That was really exciting also and that's something that came out in the edit. I think we are going to see more films like that where the filmmaker is emboldened to weave himself into the story. So often you watch a really compelling observational documentary and I always wonder what's the camera man thinking, what's the director thinking, where are they, where's their story inside this amazing story and often times it's completely removed from the story it's not part of the story. We wanted, and in a way we had to because we had such intimate footage, we had to kind of weave ourselves into the story and place ourselves within context not only as characters but filmmakers and struggle to make that film into the film. So the documentary is not just about the Revolution it's a film about making the film. I love those kinds of stories like *Blair Witch* – movie about people making a movie or *Living in Oblivion*. I love that in front of the camera/behind the camera layer, story within a story within a story. If you can weave them together you have extremely powerful material.

#### Arab Screening

Has the film shown in Egypt?

Yeah we have, we've shown. We were very careful showing the film in Egypt because, certainly under the military rule, we had to be very, very careful about showing the film in public. We showed first private screenings at home with our friends, other filmmakers and this was very successful because as people became aware of the film there was a lot of talk, a lot of underground. In a way this secrecy about showing the film helped promote the film and kept us out of the limelight out of the domestic attention and that was important for a while. Now people have become aware of the film, we've shown it at some public venues. We've showed it at the French Cultural Center, at the Ismailia Documentary Film Festival. Arab critics have seen the film, they saw it in Dubai, and that was good because they wrote some great reviews of the film and it created an awareness of the film. Even if people hadn't seen it they'd heard about it and they'd heard we did very well at Sundance and major festivals. We also had an advantage of coming out of the gate so fast and that's really important. When you're the first film to talk about something you have that pull position. Audiences will rally around your message and that will be the message they remember, but if you are the third film or fifth film on that topic it's very difficult to change the perceptions of audiences or to even get their attention because they've already seen that story. So that was very good for us in terms of the way the West accepted the film and it also kind of feeds back into the domestic audience where "oh this film has done so well outside it must be really good, people have to see it." We actually had a lot of pressure from filmmakers and activists to show the film and to show it very prominently, and proudly and publicly. I was a bit skeptical on that. I didn't want to expose myself and my family and our identities too much to the domestic audience especially during these sensitive times. But it's starting to become more acceptable, the danger threat is less now with Morsi coming in. So we are going to show it more, we are going to show it more publicly, people are showing it on their own, different Cultural Centers are showing it. It

resonates with the people, but they are so quick to forget what happened. Of course the authorities, the government, the military want everybody just to forget about what happened. They are always trying to cover it up whether it's painting over the graffiti, arresting filmmakers, or banning movies and stuff like that.

Is that still happening today?

Yea it's happening. So we still have to be careful. In a sense, we do have some insurance because of the attention we have gotten in the West. Journalists are aware of us, film festivals are aware of us and audiences. It would be counterproductive if anybody were to give us problems because of this film because there is such support within the Revolution for this. When people see it they really get transformed back to those days. They get a very clear reminder of what happened not just in the street. It was an interesting phenomenon that we were able to document which is the home life, the paranoia, the fear, the emotions, what's happening. This was really an indirect phenomenon that we were able to document and layer into the film where people are like "that's exactly what was happening in my house!" That phenomenon was happening in every household around the country, this insecurity this uncertainty of what was going to happen. Often times the story is not so direct, there are many indirect stories and subtleties and nuances that are happening in the emotional space of people which is very hard to capture on its own but cumulatively you can create an atmosphere with the film and draw out these undocumentable moments and subtext. That's what people tuned in to. They loved the crowds on the street, the mayhem, the chaos, the power of the people but it's also the fragility of individuals and the intimacy of friends and family that we're able to bring across in the film and that's where it's also really resonates with Egyptians. They see themselves in the film even though we aren't typical Egyptians. In fact, we are considered to be foreigners even though I am Egyptian. Our lifestyle is different and obviously we are speaking English a lot of the time. So we're not typical, but people see through that because they see a human story and they can relate to that. So we'll show it more in Egypt and as time goes on it will be more and more acceptable to show it and really use it as a document of the Revolution.

#### Future Screenings

Can you tell us some of the future showing for the film? Opportunities that people can have a chance to watch it.

We've been very fortunate; we got picked up by Focus Features and they are going to start rolling the film out in select cities later this month. So you'll be able to see it in DC, New York, New Jersey, Boston and Ann Arbor, Michigan. These will be one screening per city and hopefully we'll grow through that. They are using social media to get a grassroots movement, people into the cinemas. It's all really online, social media, word-of-mouth and very grassroots. These screenings in New York, DC and Boston, obviously we want to get the theatres filled. Tell your friends to come on out, show some support for an independent film and certainly for a Revolution. Hopefully if we get enough people to these screenings there will be more of them.



## Advice for Filmmakers

Do you have any particular strategies or advice that you'd like to give filmmakers in conflict areas? Because being a filmmaker in a conflict area is totally different from being a filmmaker anywhere else. Are there a couple points you want to highlight or recommend to them?

Well I'm not a war photographer, or war filmmaker or journalist, so I'm not too qualified to really comment on that. But any good story there's going to be conflict in it. It depends on the level of conflict. If you are talking about interpersonal relationships this is conflict, this is something you want to document. If say, you are in a war zone it's a totally different ball game. I really don't have that experience. I would say the number one thing is to always be aware of your surroundings. The whole point of documenting something that's worth documenting is being able to predict with sort of a sixth sense what's going to happen, where it's going to go. Is this person lining up for a fight or a conflict with someone else? This is part of the art of what we do; being very aware of the nuances of energies and emotions that are inside the characters that you are following and obviously the context within which they function you have to be quite aware of and what the dangers are and what the comfort zone is. Typically I like to get to know people without the camera on, just make them feel comfortable with me. There's an element of trust that has to be established for you to be able to capture those intimate moments where it's usually a bit uncomfortable to have the camera on. That's really what we are going for, what we are looking for that's not the time to turn it off, it's the time to keep it on. When people tell you to turn it off that's when you got to keep rolling. You have to be a bit sneaky and tricky, untraditional to get the story that you need. Certainly you have to have the camera on and framed up to capture those moments. Personal safety is really up to the filmmaker and I think the cameraman, sometimes to be naïve is actually kind of an advantage. Because you can find yourself wondering into a very dangerous situation that you aren't aware of and capture things that if you knew what was going on you probably wouldn't be there. Again, it's all about being a shadow, blending in to the crowd, taking advantage of certain situations to get what you need and doing it in an unorthodox and very off the cuff sort of way. Spontaneous is the best way to get stuff.