"I was given the role after the chosen actress refused it" the narrator in Have You Ever Killed a Bear or Becoming Jamila tells us. These are the words of the actor chosen to play Jamila Bouhired—a revolutionary of the Algerian anticolonial struggle. Once an extra, our narrator has now been tasked with embodying Bouhired in an imagined film that is a reenactment of the trial in 1957 for her alleged role in a series of bombings and a reprise of her depiction in Gillo Pontecorvo’s The Battle of Algiers (1966), excerpts of which are placed judiciously throughout Arsanios’ twenty-five minute film.

Our new lead informs us the now-replaced actress saw Bouhired as “a criminal and nothing more”; she saw in her character a certain monstrosity that threatened to compromise her own self-image. The revolutionary’s legacy is a catalytic force whose trajectory and impact can be hard to predict. As Marwa Arsanios rightly acknowledges, once enlisted by Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egyptian government in the 1950s and 1960s as an emblem of anti-imperialism, the power of Bouhired’s image was subsumed into the tendentious machinery of a “patriarchal state project”. This is one of Arsanios’ central queries, expressed with as much scepticism as the project calls for.

By the time the protagonist in Becoming Jamila encounters Bouhired on the cover of the Egyptian cultural magazine Al Hilal, the potentially “monstrous heroine”—whose political capital had been distilled into the stuff of popular agitprop—already belonged to a lineage of historic women whose names and images have stood sentinel at the revolution’s threshold. Unlike the many other women who graced the cover of Al Hilal, mostly models and actresses in graceful poses, Bouhired wielded a gun—pointing her weapon at the reader with formidable brio.

But the image of militancy in Arsanios’ work is hardly stable; it wavers and fluctuates. In the artist’s own words: “There is a fine line here where I want to position myself that precisely admits the ambivalence of feelings when facing such an image.” So we sense a contrast between the militant surety of history’s record and the sheepish stealth of Becoming Jamila’s protagonist, the extra-turned-leading woman, as she re-enacts the scene in Pontecorvo’s masterpiece during which a bomb is planted. As the once peripheral figure transforms into a gleaming emblem of revolt, a symbol installed for posterity, she reminds us of Bouhired’s historic acts—now cast as gestures that we are fated to repeat.

With Amateurs, Stars and Extras, Arsanios returns to gendered labour and performance as themes. She chips away at bourgeois domesticity’s veneer of civility, unravels the mechanisms of the documentary form alongside the unsung labour of the extra in film and television. In the work’s first few minutes, Arsanios takes us behind the scenes into a script reading of sorts. In 2007, a subtitle tells us, a cohort of Lebanese writers, dancers and architects anonymously penned a manifesto from which the following lines have been excerpted:

1  http://www.vdrome.org/marwa-arsanios-have-you-ever-killed-a-bear-or-becoming-jamila
2  Ibid.
3  Ibid.
The kitchen will be invaded by leisure, waste of time, and time-killing
The kitchen will be invaded by dance and pleasure
The kitchen will be invaded by dance and laughter
The so-called family, the so-called house, will fall and collapse
Invade the kitchen, waste time, resist labour

“We are concerned with our sisters who have travelled very far to work in houses.” This house-work is, to be sure, without security and without entitlements. In one scene, we are taken to the epicentre of this criminal form of servitude: the kitchen. Lila, a young Filipina house-worker, tells the story of being in Lebanon away from her family. She was once sold the false promise of finding a surrogate family in her employers—in exchange for her time, effort, and loyalty; now, as she laments, she is treated like a “robot”. In one particularly memorable moment, she parodies, with childlike relish, her employer’s cruel and ceaseless demands for her attention.

Against a backdrop of pristine furniture, bric-a-brac and art—the markings of refinement—domesticity’s pageantry of familial bliss is always waiting to be staged. But what we call capitalism today has done more than traffic in images of comfortable and fashionable living across borders; it has, for almost two centuries now, made goods and dispensable labour of people whose freedom must necessarily be curtailed to uphold its rapacious enterprise. In the words of the film’s house-workers—all of them women, none of them white—we must be attentive to a resounding plea for gender, race and class to converge in our politics.

Who is afraid of ideology? is a capacious work in which Arsanios has folded a range of ideas and forms. Among them: footage of interviews and conversations; recorded phone calls; a series of white plant illustrations on black; a book of dried plant samples, which open the film’s second part as an introduction to several plant species and their therapeutic uses; the mundane details of daily life—captured in modest and often-languid ways; and the ecological teachings passed down over centuries and so often pitted against the nation-state’s myopic wastefulness and its brutish tendencies.

But Arsanios reminds us that some have sought to resist this encroaching abuse of power—so she gives a glimpse of the women who have and continue to. We witness them in communion—the artist is sometimes with them on couches and on floors in conversation. The film takes us to the village of Jinwar, Northern Syria, where, as one resident informs us, “all women are welcome”. Here, the single, the widowed, the unmarried—and those escaping feckless husbands, as one seamstress says later in the film—make a home away from the demands of patriarchal union.

Central to the life-project that is Jinwar village is the land. Unsurprisingly, the security approval for land purchases in the area has, historically, been difficult for Kurds to gain. Similarly, the prohibition of cultivating anything but cotton and wheat has been used by the state to impede prosperity amongst the village residents in the hopes of curtailing their bargaining power and their rights. Yet we see, in the face of such hostility, a classroom, joyful scenes of play and collaboration, the village seamstress in lively confab. What the community of Jinwar has cultivated is camaraderie with the ecologies around them, a kinship that is itself built on a shared communitarian ethos.

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