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E-Seminar 67

**As it were: Narrative Struggles, Historiopraxy and the Stakes of the Future
in the Documentation of the Syrian Uprising**

**by
Andreas Bandak
University of Copenhagen**

**Discussant's Comments by
Christa Salamandra
City University of New York**

Christa Salamandra (christa.salamandra@lehman.cuny.edu) 16 Nov 2021

Hi Everyone,

Firstly, warm thanks to EASA Media Network series new Chair, Nina Grønlykke Mollerup, for the invitation to participate in her inaugural seminar, and to Andreas Bandak for a fascinating paper that provides a compelling introduction to the University of Copenhagen's project-in-progress, Archiving the Future: Re-Collections of Syria in War and Peace.

The paper offers a rich and erudite theoretical backdrop to the role time plays in Syrian documentarians' reckoning with revolution and its afterlives. I particularly appreciated Andreas' attention to the temporal context of documentary films as frozen moments which, with the passage of time, read so very differently to those involved in their making.

Andreas' invocation of James Clifford's (1986) concept of the partial truth is particularly apt. As his subject filmmaker Ali Atassi notes, the Syrian conflict—said to be the most mediated in history—has generated a war of competing narratives. These accounts tend towards purist positioning, with nuance often dismissed as “whataboutism.” Andreas understands this dynamic well, and, following Koselleck, notes that Syrians are beginning to ponder just what sort of victory or defeat they have “won” or “lost.” Certainly, the Arab uprisings and their varied afterlives have forced a reconsideration of what constitutes success and failure (Halabi 2017; Sheet 2021).¹

1 In her analysis of Hezbollah logo parodies that critique the party's support for the Syrian regime during the uprising, Nour Halabi argues for the power of carnivalesque media practices to unsettle dominant narratives and, potentially, extant power structures over a revolutionary *longue durée*. Douaa Sheet's 2021 dissertation on mediated truth commissions in the aftermath of the Tunisian Revolution makes a similar argument for problematizing notions of revolutionary success and failure.

The focus on reflection is particularly generative, given that the current moment, as Andreas notes, marks a slowdown in the tempo of events. This new “space of pensiveness” is indeed the legacy of so much sacrifice and suffering. It points to the central question of how to render meaningful events that did not deliver—or perhaps have not yet fulfilled—their promise. It is important to note, however, that reflective and reflexive treatments of the past were not born with the uprising. As my own work on Syrian drama demonstrates, the question of “what went wrong” very often in the form of “what did we do wrong” animate Syrian fictional television produced before as well as during the war (Salamandra 2019).

Andreas draws on an interdisciplinary range of sources in his discussions of key concepts such as historiopraxy, pensiveness, sedimentation, and nostalgia, and deftly traces their intellectual lineages. This expansiveness is evocative but unwieldy in such a brief paper. It would be helpful to have a more focused framing and a more explicit relating of theory to ethnography. Additionally, the intriguing title phrase could be pushed further: what work does “as it were” do here? What ironies does it suggest? What does it enable, elide, and/or foreclose?

There is an occasional confusion of voice here. Who exactly is doing/should do the work of reflecting (p.3-4)? Syrian activists and cultural producers, academics, or all who care about Syrian jointly? It is unclear throughout who exactly the “we” includes? This problem becomes literal on p.9: who comprised the group referred to in the meeting with Rami Farah? Overall, I would like to see more ethnographic texture. The ethnography is compressed into a relatively brief four pages that are filled with evocative ellipses. I would like to have seen more engagement with this material and its relationship to the paper’s rich but diffuse theoretical scaffolding. Relevant literatures on the mediation of the Syrian conflict might also be useful here. To cite one example, interlocutors’ commentary on the proliferation of violent imagery recalls, and might be put into fruitful dialogue with, the conversation on the ethics of the image and the exploitation of Syrian suffering sparked by the writings of the Syrian film collective Abounaddara (2016, 2019). In addition, there is a voluminous literature on the ethics of imagery and its evidentiary uses.

I am also curious about the contexts in which these films circulate, and the audiences they do and do not reach. How exactly do these films allow “ordinary Syrians impacted by tragedy to watch, stop, and talk about the events in their own words” (p. 10) when, as Syrian journalist Waseem al-Sharqi argues, they are narrowly distributed, and never reach audiences inside Syria (2019). Similarly, Aman Bezreh posits that global audiences for Syrian documentaries include few Syrians (2019). Is this “we” confined to a relatively narrow group of activists? Such circles of producer/consumers are important and worthy of ethnography consideration but claims of these documentaries’ impact on ordinary Syrians must be tempered.

It would also be instructive to learn more about the paper’s own history, and its place within the wider project. For instance, what is the role of professionally produced documentaries in archiving a revolution that has entered global consciousness through the mobile phone imagery of “citizen journalists”? How and why were these two filmmakers chosen from among the many new generation Syrian documentarians?

I also advocate for the inclusion of Syrian analysts into this and other conversations about Syrian media. This is not merely a nod to citational political correctness; Syrian media scholars have produced relevant work, including al-Ghazzi on nostalgia (2013), and historicity (2016); Alhayek on audiences (2020a.; 2002b.); and Halabi (2017) on parody and

the *longue durée* of revolutionary action.

A minor point: I would like some explication about the characterization of Syrian conflict as a tragedy. Tragedy is, of course, a concept with its own theoretical genealogy.

Finally, for me, Andreas' focus on the temporal dimensions of documentary conjured questions of the spatial, particularly given the experiences of exile and diaspora that inform these films. But perhaps that is for another paper!

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