

**Media Anthropology Network
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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
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**Discussant
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Nina Grønlykke Madsen (ninagmollerup@gmail.com) 16 Nov 2021

Dear all,

I am happy to open the 67th EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar, “As it were: Narrative Struggles, Historiopraxy and the Stakes of the Future in the Documentation of the Syrian Uprising” (Dr. Andreas Bandak, University of Copenhagen).

Professor Christa Salamandra (City University New York), who is our discussant, will first post her comments on the paper. Then Andreas Bandak will post his reply after which I will open the e-seminar for all.

As always, our e-seminars run for two weeks and take place solely over the mailing list. You can participate by sending your comments to the list at medianthro@lists.easaonline.org once the seminar has been opened to all.

If you have not had the chance to read the paper yet, you can find it here:

<https://easaonline.org/networks/media/eseminars>

I am looking forward to your contributions to what promises to be an interesting and thought-provoking e-seminar.

Cheers,

Nina

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]

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!

[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.

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Andreas Bandak (bandak@hum.ku.dk)

16 Nov 2021

First of all, just thanks, Christa -

Thanks for taking the time to engage so thoroughly with my working paper. I really appreciate your thoughts and comments, which I am sure will allow for a fuller reworking and maturation of perspectives both for the paper at hand as well as for our "Archiving the Future" project.

I am happy that you find the paper engaging and that the focus on the temporal orientations and shifts also finds resonance with you in your own work. Your own Middle East Critique piece (2019) has indeed been very helpful in its unpacking of the ways Syrian TV-series and their directors have found ways to address 'what went wrong'. In this working paper, my attempt has been to think through some of the stakes that we have found in our engagement with exiled Syrian cultural producers particularly in the burgeoning scene of Syrian documentaries (for a larger overview of the scene, I point to the work of Joshka Wessels (2018)). In this paper, I have rather tried to focus on a particular shift in tempo that have been a consequence of the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict. Where the initial phase of the uprising demanded immediate and drastic action, the current phase is marked by a much different and much slower temporal orientation. I address this shift by attending to Syrian cultural producers and thinkers and their engagement with what happened. To me it has been important to think through various registers of this shift, and for that purpose I have found it productive to forge a conversation between the concepts, you also mark out here, namely those of historiopraxy, sedimentation and pensiveness. These may perhaps seem 'unwieldy'.

However, I think they are productive to release something in the ethnographies, that we are producing in the wider context of the “Archiving the Future” project. I think that the work on and with the past as presented here finds a better grounding when placed in conversation with these concepts.

However, I also think that the ethnography pushes back against the concepts – as all good ethnography indeed should.

At the same time, I do think that this paper offers something different than what has been presented before. In your work on the tackling of ‘what went wrong’, what is addressed takes place within and in relation to the Syrian state. In this paper, what I offer is an engagement with Syrian cultural producers who are in exile and who all deliberately speak against or outside the frame of the Syrian state and regime. So I would say that there is a significant difference at play, namely that the defeat or loss experienced in exile takes on a much more haunting presence as a return to Syria is impossible to these cultural producers. One could therefore ask if the ‘what went wrong’ question operates on the same terrain. The key question here is what happens with the move in exile and displacement.

You also ask to the use of the ‘As it were’, which I use in my title, and to which kinds of play it allows for. In my conception, the ‘as it were’ is a productive way to think about the relationship between actuality, factuality and potentiality. As time passes what has happened in the Syrian context are articulated in new ways, and the story becomes more fragmented and personalized as evidenced by Rami Farah and Ali Atassi in my material.

To me the ‘as it were’ plays on the ambiguity of the ‘as if’, which Lisa Wedeen so aptly describes in her important works on Syria (1999, 2019). A politics of ‘as if’ in Wedeen’s reading is based on the fact that much of Syrian politics have been based on a symbolism, where people would act as if they revere the leader and state, while this for many hardly was the case. I have in your edited volume, “Syria from Reform to Revolt. Culture, Society and Religion” (with Leif Stenberg, 2015), presented the argument that for some of Syria’s minorities, such as many Christians, the visions of a multicultural state was indeed not far off their aspirations in the years preceding 2011. In moments of crisis, the ‘as if’ frequently risk collapsing into an ‘as is’ – that the reality at hand actually could promise something if not good, then at least workable, that it is what it is. With the ‘as it were’ my intention, if perhaps never making it to the page, has been to open up for the re-constructing of the past that now takes place in exiled Syrians memory-work. These memories draw from what happened but also often inadvertently play with that reality, changing one’s position, making one either more or less responsible for what actually took place. In that sense, I see ‘as it were’ as contrasted with ‘as it was’, which appears ‘solidly’ to be grounded in fact. I definitely hope to develop this more in the time to come as there obviously is much more to unpack here.

Another important point raised in your discussion regards audience. Indeed, that the current scene of Syrian documentaries is burgeoning is not the same as that they have a wide uptake amongst Syrians. In the paper, I focus on the reflections on the documentaries as presented by Rami Farah as well as Ali Atassi. The point I am trying to stress in this paper is not that Syrians “en bloc” engage their work – some do and they are indeed circulated also internationally. Rather, the paper engages the way such thoughtful actors address the current predicament and how they go about the struggle over narrative and memory. So, I think the documentaries are important as engaging different realities and also in keeping them in store for posterity. That said, Syrians are positioned very differently with regards to documentaries

and other cultural interventions. In my ethnographic research on Syrian families in Denmark, one interlocutor indeed made a distinction between film and documentaries, while we spoke of “The Cave” by Feras Fayyad. As seen from the perspective of this interlocutor the film was narrated for a Western audience, and was not to be trusted. He made a direct contrast between film and documentaries, saying that Fayyad’s was just a film and not a documentary. In Arabic, a documentary [film wathaiqi] builds on the word trust [thiqah], which allows us to speculate not merely on the claims to truth or veracity in these kinds of films but also their reception.

Why taking up Rami Farah and Ali Atassi. We have in our group worked with a number of Syrian documentarists and cultural producers, so I am not trying to privilege Farah and Atassi here. However, my purpose have been to use their work and their articulations as examples to think with (Bandak and Højer 2015). As examples of a moving terrain, where they powerfully engage the past and reflect honestly about their own stakes in what came to pass. Examples are good to think with, not because they purport to cover everything but because they point us toward details. Etymologically, example derives from “eximere”, which means a cutting out or an incision (Arendt 1982). As such the example cuts something out of a larger whole in order to allow for us engage with it. In this paper, I see Rami Farah and Ali Atassi as offering us a particular vocabulary for reflection, and I guess I also chose to work more closely with this material because they both so strongly evoked something in me. As an anthropologist who has worked in Syria several years before the uprisings, I think that the approaches by Atassi and Farah point to the plurality of positions at play in the Syrian situation.

Images obviously are important, when we talk about documentaries. In this paper, I have deliberately chosen not to solicit images and visual culture as object of inquiry. Not because this would not be relevant but because we in the project are attending to the work of images as a separate strand of our research. So, I am not unaware of the work done on this as well as the problematics pertaining to the visibility of conflict. In this working paper, however, I hope to have addressed the importance of engaging with the reflections on and hold of the past, when moving towards the future.

Thanks for references and many more succinct points for further reflection and discussion. I think I will leave the discussion open now and perhaps return to these as the conversation gets going.

Cheers,

Andreas

Nina Grønlykke Madsen (ninagmollerup@gmail.com) 16 Nov 2021

Dear all,

Thank you very much to Dr. Andreas Bandak for his thought-provoking paper and to Professor Christa Salamandra for her inspiring comments.

The seminar is now open for all to participate.

We look forward to an engaging discussion.

Cheers,

Nina

John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)

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Nov

2021

Many thanks for sharing your working paper, Andreas. I was particularly intrigued by the 'what went wrong' collective reflection (of great cross-cultural comparative potential), by the role of Syrian documentary filmmakers (both issues reminded me of the Spanish 15M/indignados) and by your diachronic approach.

Our worldview is so driven by headlines and virals these days, especially of the US (political) entertainment variety, that it's important to read ethnographic accounts about places and people most of us only know of superficially. Reading your paper I was reminded of the Spanish-Syrian journalist and indignada Leila Nachawati who I interviewed in Madrid in early 2014 as part of my 'nerd politics' research. Nachawati noted how quickly Spanish and other European activists (not to mention 'the general public') forgot the plight of Syrian and other Arabs that so inspired their own protest movements in 2011.

That's a key feature of the news mediation of political conflict, I suppose. In our grossly dysfunctional global information system, most conflicts outside the US get their brief moment of international fame and then are quickly forgotten. Some hardly ever get a mention at all, e.g. West Papua, Western Sahara.

I think your longitudinal approach is sorely needed, especially the changing reflections over time on the kind of 'restructuring' events that the historian William H. Sewell has written about, in this case the Syrian uprising.

Here I'm reminded of the anthropologist Patty Gray's (2016) discussion of 'being then', in real time, remotely via social media from Ireland during the 2011-2013 Russian protests, vs. the old Geertzian 'being there' in the field as an anthropologist. In your case you seem to be studying your research participants' reflections on 'being then' during the uprising, as well as the process of changing their minds about their significance. So it's a manner of 'remote ethnography' as well as a remote social history of the Syrian conflict from the perspective of exiled documentary filmmakers and people around them.

I guess what I'm clumsily getting at is the following question: What are the methodological implications of your paper? What advice would you give prospective researchers wanting to do this kind of work?

Finally, a parting thought on the phrase 'as it were', which Christa queried in her thoughtful comments. I am no linguist, but to me the common meaning of 'as it were' is 'so to speak'. I'm not sure it really works as you intended, as it were. It may be an idea to retire it, perhaps find a Syrian expression instead, to echo Christa's suggestion of a more Syrian cultural embedding of the paper.

John

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Andreas Bandak (abandak@gmail.com)

18

Nov

2021

Response to John Postill

Thanks for such a succinct and generous reading of my paper, John. I really appreciate your pointing to the potential for cross-cultural comparison of the thinking back or reflecting on the 'what went wrong'-question. I think this definitely is a fertile arena for anthropological work these years, where lots of hopes for change are disappointed and look to past and present opportunities not met or taken. This question obviously is much larger than the ethnography presented in this paper. I would be most happy to see such a conversation take place also on the less hopeful aspects of existence.

Your reflections made me think about how reflections themselves travel.

Reflections travel in and through time but also, as earlier pointed out by Christa, they travel spatially. In my ongoing research, I have come to appreciate how reflections also travel and traverse languages. Talking about the Syrian conflict in France and Denmark is not the same as the contexts of reception as well as engagement with Syria are different. Even for some of my Syrian interlocutors in a Danish context they deliberately ponder which language to use, when speaking of what happened. Some say that they would prefer to talk on the past in Danish as this gives them a different command over the past. Or, you could say, it enables a different grip on the past. Thinking with Alfred Schutz's work on the stranger (1944), where he exactly points to the feeling strange also by the role of language in one's new location, seems crucial.

In our wider work, we also engage with Syrian cultural producers such as Mohammad al-Attar, who ponders the same question of language in his artistic work and in conversations with us. Reflections in this vein also makes us think about the question of media, on how not just images but also thoughts and reflections circulate, are carried forward, and are transmitted. Importantly, engaging reflections hopefully helps us get behind the much faster news circuit. By engaging Syrian reflections on what has come to pass, we may slow down and arrest the moving images, talk about them, return to them, and accordingly come to appreciate more than their surface.

The reflection above also pertains to your important comments and questions regarding methodology, on the being 'then' or 'there'. I hope that this paper shows that a longer ethnographic engagement opens up for how different sediments of time can coexist, but also how these can change over time. Talking on media products with directors or Syrian interlocutors offer a lense through which to understand the negotiation of past and present, as the media product has a given format, unlike the reflections.

What I, and we in the Archiving the Future project, aspire to is to work not just on the Syrian context but also with Syrian actors, both ordinary Syrians, cultural producers, documentarists and photographers.

Accordingly, we have a number of our interlocutors coming to Copenhagen to discuss the Syrian situation and how to narrate and present it with us and our students.

Lastly, on 'As it were', is according to the Cambridge Dictionary "sometimes said after a figurative (=not meaning exactly what it appears to mean) or unusual expression." This was what I intended to play on. I take from your comments that I need more work to ground it. However, at least for me it does have a merit in the way it gestures to the attempt to put into words an experience, also when one is not entirely certain, or one is trying something out. In the Syrian case, such a lack of certainty, to me, seems to be a significant shift in the engagement with the past. With lack of certainty I do not point to the general idea of why the uprising started, but rather the nagging question of whether this was worth it, or of the personal costs that many have faced and now have too much time to ponder. Hence, we meet profound Syrian figures in the films of Ali Atassi and Rami Farah, figures such as Yassin al-Haj Saleh and Fares Helou tormented by the past and trying to come to terms with it. Engaging such re-engagements with the past, is painful but important in the move towards the future.

Andreas

Schutz, Alfred (1944): "The Stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology," *American Journal of Sociology**, vol. 49, No. 6: 499-507.

David Zeitlyn (david.zeitlyn@anthro.ox.ac.uk) 19 Nov 2021

Dear All

Some comments on this paper follow:

Andreas Bandak presents us with the results of discussions with some Syrian film makers and documentarists.

As ever, as in all of life, we are in media res but here in a particularly pointed way. These films were made in the middle of the Syrian war. If there's an imagined nostalgia there's also an imagined future. No matter who 'wins' the war, one day the titular 'rulers' of Syria will be different. It is always possible to think that the grandchildren of the film makers Bandak is working with, will have a happier life than they have. The film makers are stuck, in lives inflected by the hypothetical 'as it were' Bandak discusses, in which alternative pasts and futures interfere with the grim, shocking actuality of current presents (see Zeitlyn 2020).

I am concerned that the wider context of the documentation of the Syrian War which the documentarists are using is not here discussed. Ali Atassi mentions p8 'the archives', but these archives are themselves extraordinary and complex phenomena that now have a literature to themselves, see references below. This may stretch the topic too much for a single article but I think more than a passing mention is needed.

And these can be seen as what Henning Trüper calls "wild archives" – which I cite because, interestingly one of his case studies is from a pre-WWI German expedition to Syria – looking at archaeological epigraphic 'archives' – inscriptions 'archived' on rock faces and on stones in peoples' backyards.

Finally, I am not convinced that Simon Coleman’s idea of historiopraxy is helpful. I think is important to consider how people ‘alternate between a ‘making’ of history and an ‘invoking’ of history’ (p5) but I do not see how bundling these together under one analytic term helps our understanding. But I am constitutionally leery of neologisms. Perhaps I am neologophobic, alternating between a refusal to use neologisms and invoking them in denial?

David Zeitlyn

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Andreas Bandak (abandak@gmail.com) 19 Nov 2021

Thanks for your comments, David –

Indeed, your own work has been important in our work on temporal orderings and the role of the future. As you have pointed out, most studies to date have directed their attention toward archives already in existence (Zeitlyn 2012). Here I think that the Syrian case allows us to explore archives in their formative process. By examining processes of archiving in a Syrian context, I see a formidable chance to theorize the reconfiguration of temporal orderings of past, present and future.

Accordingly, the central contention of the “Archiving the Future” project is that Syria offers an exemplary case to reflect on the power of images and how processes of archiving enable a grip, not merely on the past, but also on the present and the future. The research questions we keep returning to are: “How do archives come into being, and how do they shape, regulate, and change perceptions, memories, and potential futures? How is the image of Syria re-

assembled, re-made, and re-mediated by Syrian actors across personal, collective, and institutional contexts? And how do political changes in the present impact on the reading and use of the past in the creation of viable futures?”

Here you suggest that we see the Syrian archive through the notion of ‘wild archives’ as pointed to by Henning Trüper. This surely is possible.

However, I am not sure that I see the added value. In this paper, my strategy was not to deal with the archive per se but rather the particular work on time in selected documentaries and in conversations with their producers. In this sense, I in this paper emphasize different aspects than that of the archive. For instance, I explore the relationship between historicity (Hirsch and Stewart 2005) and historiopraxy (Coleman 2011), which to me adds some analytical depth to the discussions on the documentation of the past. Namely, it shows the complicated human role of both making and invoking history, and how we tend to switch between acting and being acted upon (see also Jackson 2002).

You also point to the matter of context. Sure, I could easily add more about the war and the coming into being of the wider archive. These are indeed important matters and some that we are ruminating over in the “Archiving the Future” project. However, I believe that we need to be sensitive to the changing contexts, and also the very problem of context here (cf. Dilley 1999). In one of the documentaries presented in the paper, we engage Rami Farah and his work, which plays on an archive of more than 12.000 videos that he used in “Our Memory Belongs to Us” – and which Dima Saber, whom you reference, has been working with at Birmingham City University. For Rami as well as for a number of the Syrian documentarists, they tell openly about how hard it is to approach and select from such large repositories. I therefore believe that the paper actually points to something important, when it engages the ways footage, memories, and the wider archive are being re-assembled and re-addressed, when it moves outside and away from the Syrian war and enters new terrains.

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John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)

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Nov

2021

Andreas, reading your response to David Zeitlyn, I was thinking perhaps the paper would benefit from a rough map or sketch of the 'space' of Syrian documentary filmmaking about the conflict, at least in the European context. Some kind of visual or verbal overview of who's who, where they are located, what circuits (film festivals, universities, archives, etc) they are part of. I don't know about other seminar participants, but at the moment I'm having trouble placing the various protagonists of this story and their 'space of possibilities' or historical time-geography.

Your point about language in connection to processing painful memories in your response to my post is intriguing. There seems to be great potential in looking not just at deliberate language choice (Arabic, English, Danish, French...) but also at more spontaneous code-switching and code-mixing in different contexts as they get on with their works and lives. What about smartphones and social media? Isn't that how many of their audience members (first) come into contact with the documentaries? How important are producers' and audiences' 'cloud' archives (or lack thereof) to this domain of cultural production?

John

Daniel Knight (dmk3@st-andrews.ac.uk)

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Nov

2021

Thanks, Andreas, for sharing this engaging and thought-provoking paper. While reading previous commentaries on the piece with great interest, for me your intervention provides welcome contribution to discussions of event/eventedness and chronic conditions of crisis.

To my mind, the piece very much speaks to Henrik Vigh's (2008) call to consider crisis as context, and particularly to think about what temporalities are involved as crisis-as-rupture turns to chronic condition. The tempos, rhythms and futural orientations of schisms are often more readily captured by anthropologists and, perhaps, our research participants alike. What you do is introduce the temporal and affective complexities of life after the event, where, to paraphrase Lauren Berlant (2011), violent ordinariness of deterioration becomes the defining condition of historical existence.

I have enjoyed Chloe Ahmann's (2018) recent work on eventedness – or the need to create and maintain events in a form of 'temporal manipulation' – which I see as linked to the slow/axiomatic/structural violence lit (e.g. Pipyrrou and Sorge's new Anth Forum collection on axiomatic violence). You rightly ask, if revolutions (crisis-as-rupture) are all about speed and acceleration, then what happens to the hopes, dreams, and actions of events when the hot temporalities (in Carol Greenhouse's terms) cool off? I found during the crisis years in Greece that people would regularly ask 'when are we?' as in inhabiting an elsewhen/somewhen. There was a general disorientation of temporal trajectory, first through sudden rupture, then in a seemingly directionless chronic state.

Histories being overwritten is obviously a core concern of your Syrian informants, where the everydayness will silence the events of the past. This certainly seems to be the case for the younger generations who did not live, or participate in, the uprising – in Greece I find something similar in 'the crisis generation' who have known nothing but economic austerity and thus find the chronic crisis normal, ordinary, axiomatic. Here I think that Coleman's claim about 'creating a present that, from the perspective of the future, will be recognised to have been a radical transformation' adds something extra to the chronic crisis literature and debate on requiring eventedness for the perspective of the future past (hindsight, as it were). When you quote Das speaking of 'Decent into everydayness' this could mean many things: the return to a structural or axiomatic state after the 'heat' of an emergent event; a Stockholm Syndrome-type uncomfortable comfort where the familiarity of the crisis condition means desire to maintain the status quo overwhelms any momentum toward crossing futural thresholds of the unknown (Knight 2020); or, indeed, decent into everydayness could indicate healing and reconciliation (and whatever historicities are forcibly silenced in this).

Finally, a comment on “As it were”, which seems to have split opinion. You say that this term “may not just point to how things actually were but also to how they potentially could be” (actuality, factuality, potentiality). I actually, factually, potentially, like it! It reminds me of ‘sub-certainties’ in the irony literature by people like Michael Carrithers and James Fernandez (sub-certainties are nicely summarised in Pipyrrou’s 2014 American Ethnologist paper on irony). ‘As it were’ seems to indicate the multiple potential teleoaffective orientations of the narratives, it is multi-directional, and I think that in this way you successfully move the phrase beyond the common interpretation of ‘so to speak’.

Thanks for the stimulating read!

All best,

Daniel

Andreas Bandak (abandak@gmail.com)

22

Nov

2021

Thanks, John, for pushing the paper to reflect or engage further the various circuits and wider scene of Syrian documentaries. This might be an option. One of the reasons that I have not done so in this paper is that Joshka Wessels at Lund University recently has published a book (2019), where she provides such an overview of the developments in the scene of Syrian documentaries – a book I refer to in the beginning of my paper. I could certainly engage this or some of the trends further. However, my purpose with the paper has rather been to give, what philosopher Catherine Z. Elgin (2017) aptly has described as ‘epistemic access’ to this scene by engaging selected documentaries. By engaging not the larger scene here but a narrower sample, my hope is that it is possible to sense the deliberations and reflections in a different key, more close-up you could say. You could say that I zoom in on Rami Farah and Ali Atassi to help us think about the change they see as happening, which thereby allow us zoom out as well to broader anthropological questions regarding temporality, aftermath, piveness and historiopraxy.

I am also happy that you found the question of language productive to think with. This also to me is a fascinating topic and one, which I think needs further unpacking methodologically as well as theoretically. In our “Archiving the Future” project, we are all contemplating these issues of both intentional code-switching as well as more spontaneous switching and mixing. In the spring, we have seven Syrian cultural producers coming to Copenhagen to be part of a course on History, Myth and Narration and language and translation is one of the themes we are hoping to explore further – among others Rami Farah and Ali Atassi are joining us. Later, we are also hosting a workshop with these Syrian cultural producers. We hope that the different contexts these cultural producers are working from – such as Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the UK, France and Lebanon – will allow us to ponder this topic much further.

Lastly, thanks also for pointing to cell phones and the question of social media practices. These very important matters, and in our project, we combine three in-depth individual case studies. The three individual case studies focus on personal, collective, and institutional processes of archiving. Focusing on these different modalities, we hope, will allow this project to engage critically with competing registers of images and to explore which images are regarded as authentic, convincing, reliable, and moving on different scales. The three

individual projects explore 1) Syrian cellphones and personal archives, 2) online archiving and the establishment of collective records amongst Syrian activists, and 3) Arab TV broadcasting and the construction of institutional images of Syrian pasts, presents and futures. Alongside these individual case studies, we collectively engage the scene of Syrian documentaries. We therefore also engage ethnographically how the uptake and debate – which is quite varied in these different contexts – is with regards to the documentaries as well as to many other facets of life. However, one of the key features in our ethnographies is that a shift seems to be taking place. Many Syrians move from the collective to the personal. This is also the reason for my focus of this paper as I think the reflections by Rami Farah and Ali Atassi help us better understand this shift.

Andreas

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Andreas Bandak (abandak@gmail.com) 22 Nov 2021

Thanks, Daniel, for taking up some very productive perspectives for my paper as well as for the discussion on changing temporal registers.

I think that pointing to Henrik Vigh’s important work on crisis and chronicity indeed is a very relevant reference. In Vigh’s work, we see how protracted crisis may not be something that we can see happening at a particular time but rather as unfolding as a condition. As such, this leads us to reflect more carefully on the ways crisis evolve. I think that Koselleck’s work on “Crisis and Critique” is relevant here (1988) as is Janet Roitman’s recent work on discourses on crisis in her “Anti-Crisis” (2014). Here we see the development of a modern experience of crisis, where it no longer demarcate a specific point in time but rather a condition.

Thinking ethnographically from crisis contexts, it may be important to discern when and how the notion of crisis is routinized, or when people still point to specific ‘origins’ or watershed moments. I think that you are pointing us to a careful reflection on the different layers of crisis happening at different paces.

We therefore also are invited to reflect on the recent engagement with anthropology’s own legacy, where – as Joel Robbins has argued 2007 – continuities for long have been the preferred conceptual frame. Robbins accordingly has argued for taking seriously ruptures and discontinuity. In my perception, we should be vary to construe this as an antinomy between continuity and discontinuity, rather as seen from the Syrian conflict, we see a constant debate, reflection and interpretation of what has taken place, where both continuity and discontinuity are grabbed with. Some moments and developments are seen as produced by much older patterns and hence as prefigured by what the regime did in e.g. Hama in 1982. In this sense, what the regime later unleashed after 2011 is paralleled with or seen as lying dormant or latent in its inner workings. On the other side, as seen from many activists they saw something new being released in the moment of 2011 (cf. Brønds 2017). However, that

moment may now be increasingly difficult to keep alive.

At the current moment, reflections could therefore indeed turn into a form of cruel optimism as per Berlant (2011). However, I also think that it affords an opportunity to reflect more carefully on figures of disappointment (Zigon 2017) and decay (Hage 2021). What happens when jubilant expectations are not met? Here your own work on Greece and the after-effects of the financial crisis helps us to engage the affective registers of moments of crisis turning into conditions. Your recent pointing to vertigo (Knight 2021) is an example of such productive work with orientations towards the future (Bryant and Knight 2019) but also what I here playing on your work would call ‘disorientations’ in relation to the future. Your point about the ‘when’ of crisis is critical and so is your point about generations. In the Syrian context there definitely are different generational perspectives, a point which also both Ali Atassi and Rami Farah perceptively engage. The coming generations inherit the crisis, not necessarily as a moment, but indeed as a condition.

A last of your many great points that I want to end with regards the irony and multiplicity entailed in the ‘as it were’. As you formulate it: “‘As it were’ seems to indicate the multiple potential teleoaffective orientations of the narratives, it is multi-directional.” However, you also by pointing to the notion of ‘sub-certainties’ in the work of scholars like Carrithers, Fernandez and Pipyrou open up for the ironies and lacunae, which are risked, when engaging the crisis in the form of speech. Trying to get to terms with what happened in the Syrian context is unsettling, and it is not all, who has the energy to engage the past in any sustained manner. As you rightly point out, there are many different ways, where a descent into the ordinary can unfold, and indeed the collective momentum for many Syrians seem now replaced by more personal and fragmented engagements.

Andreas

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I must apologise for coming so late to these debates about Andreas's fascinating paper and given that the discussion has almost reached its end I'll confine myself to one main observation. I was struck by the use of the word 'unwieldy' in the debate between Andreas and Christa over his discussion of key concepts relating to time and history. I agree that reading Andreas's piece can initially seem quite disorienting in the sheer range of theoretical and ethnographic directions taken. But surely form and content are meshing in productive ways, invoking an evoking the open-endedness, irresolution, and friction between temporal registers that are part of what Andreas is trying to analyze.

In this sense, the whole paper is 'as it were'. Without attempting to be too literal in my reading of Andreas's reading of Koselleck's reading of sedimentation, part of the paper's discussion reminded me of Marcia Bjornerud's extraordinary semiotics of geology in her *Reading the Rocks: The Autobiography of the Earth* (2005), where she explores the chronic catastrophes and disequilibria inherent in the ground under our feet. The earth, like the archive, becomes both record of the past and unquiet, multi-layered provoker of constant transformation.

Thanks for engaging with my paper, Simon, also in the end of this discussion. Actually, I think your comment help to close this discussion.

Firstly, I appreciate your take on the form of the paper. With the paper, I had hoped to present the difficult and painful ways that Syrian cultural producers must find and take, when working through the past, both collectively and individually. By presenting the conversations with Rami Farah and Ali Atassi at some length I hoped to allow their reflections to stand out, also in their going in different directions. As such, the paper attempts to stay true to the 'open-endedness, disorientation' and indeed 'friction' that this work on the past entails. There are no neat and simple way to organize the past in the Syrian case, therefore these reflections are a critical part of a constant and unending process. Reflection here themselves are reflections, returning engagements with what came to pass.

The etymology of the word reflection points to the Latin 'flectere', to bend, and the prefix 're' meaning back. As the two of us have argued in our *Different Repetitions: Anthropological Engagements with Figures of Return, Recurrence and Redundancy*, the notion of the 're' is important as it points to a constant turning back to something also when making way for the future, however threatening or promising that may be (2019). In the case of reflections, we may perhaps speculate what such a bending back entails.

Lastly, thanks also for introducing Marcia Bjornerud's work **Reading the Rocks**. It sounds fascinating and I really like your last line: "The earth, like the archive, becomes both record of the past and unquiet, multi-layered provoker of constant transformation." I think this captures nicely how both longer and slower forms of transformation, which are recorded in the archives – inscribed on stones, bodies or minds – coexist with more recent and urgent forms of change. This, I think, bespeak the need for an anthropological engagement, which works at a different pace than the media and news circuit, and also an anthropological

engagement, which reworks and returns to the field – also when the field is moving, is unsettled and demands assiduous work. The comments and questions I have received throughout this discussion have spurred important questions regarding the temporal orderings in the aftermath of conflict but also regarding the media with which we deal with such aftermaths, as well as the ways layers of time interact or in orderly and disorderly ways.

Thanks to all involved in the discussion and in particular to Nina Grønlykke Mollerup for inviting and organizing this e-seminar.

Cheers,

Andreas

Reference

Bandak, Andreas & Simon Coleman (2019) 'Different Repetitions: Anthropological Engagements with Figures of Return, Recurrence and Redundancy', **History and Anthropology** vol. 30(2): 119-132.

Nina Grønlykke Madsen (ninagmollerup@gmail.com)

30 Nov 2021

Dear all,

Our 67th e-seminar is now closed.

Thank you so much to Andreas for allowing us to discuss his fascinating and important work and to Christa for her insightful comments both of which sparked thought-provoking conversations both on and off the list. Thank you also to everyone who has contributed.

It has been a pleasure to chair my first e-seminar despite a few technical challenges. Again, our apologies to anyone who has had technical problems - do send an email to Philipp, Sahana, Elisabetta or myself if you experience any issues.

We will upload the transcript as soon as it is ready.

Cheers,

Nina