

## **As It Were: Narrative Struggles, Historiopraxy and the Stakes of the Future in the Documentation of the Syrian Uprising<sup>1</sup>**

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“Historical reality never entirely overlaps with what can be articulated in it and about it.”

- Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time*

“This is the thought that inspires me: tragedy may be the price of freedom.”

- David Scott, *Omens of Adversity*

Ten years can seem as an eternity, when viewed in relation to the Syrian tragedy. It is hard to fathom the immensity of the hopes unleashed in March 2011 and then now ten years on to reflect on what has passed. Not only was the hopes of the demonstrators thwarted and willfully destroyed by the Syrian army supported by Russian and Iranian forces, similarly the narrative of an otherwise, of a different way forward has been combated and is now actively attempted silenced by the Syrian regime. In a sense, the active and ongoing writing of history has taken novel form in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising as evidence, testimony and historical experience has been documented so abundantly by way of cameras, cell phones and in the memories graphically engraved on the bodies and minds of the Syrian population (Bandak 2014, Wedeen 2019, McManus 2021).

In this paper, I consider the struggle over narrative, which now takes place as seen in relation to the burgeoning production of Syrian documentaries (cf. Wessels 2018, Della Ratta 2018) but which also has been evident in the production of Syrian TV-serials (Salamandra 2019). As such, this paper meditates on the role of speech, freedom and history in the aftermath of an uprising turning into a tragedy. My central concern is to unravel the changing registers of historical experience and the narrative efforts placed in keeping particular pasts alive in order to make way for the future. Inspired by Simon Coleman, I reflect on this as a particular form of historiopraxy (2011), which rearranges and reorders experiences as they oscillate between the singular and the collective, the particular and the generic in the wake of violence and atrocities on a massive scale. As a central trope, I consider the wording ‘as it were’. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, ‘as it were’ sometimes is used after a figurative or

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unusual expression. ‘As it were’ in this sense may not just point to how things actually were but also to how they potentially could be. This play between actuality, factuality and potentiality is critical for the work on the past both in the aftermath of severe crisis and tragedy but also in any ordinary sense. Accordingly, the freedom to tell and keep particular pasts alive is a burden, which demands a work of a Penelope, a constant reweaving and retying of memory as well as narrative in the meeting with the gradual changes of actual remembrance and the passing of generations with different stakes in what took place.

Taking my point of departure in my ongoing research project *Archiving the Future: Recollections of Syria in War and Peace*, I reflect on material collected over the last year among exiled Syrians. This paper opens this exploration by engaging the work of Syrian documentarists Rami Farah and Ali Atassi who both have won international acclaim for their films. Engaging the work of film hereby is inspired by Didier Fassin’s discussion of the relationship between what he calls ‘true lives and real lives’ (2014). Fassin describes how fiction allows for a different experimentation and presentation of what is *true* about life, whereas ethnography most often is bound to an ideal of presenting what is *real* about life. Obviously, as we know from James Clifford our truths are partial (1986). the ideal of presenting what is at stake in the life-worlds we explore, however, is no less critical today as it was before anthropological debates about veracity, positionality and representation started to enter the frame (cf. Fabian 1983, Marcus and Clifford 1986, Marcus and Fischer 1986, Geertz 1988). However, where Fassin discusses the different forms of and claims to truth and reality found in fiction and ethnography, respectively, my attempt is to push for an understanding of the sense-making and coming to terms with a life, which has been rendered almost surreal and fragmented for many Syrians.

My entry to this discussion have been prepared by long-term fieldwork in Syria before the uprisings, subsequent fieldwork in Lebanon and currently ethnographic work in Denmark on displaced Syrians (cf. Bandak 2014, 2015, 2019). Centrally, this paper argues that the changing tempo of conflict allows for novel engagements with the past, both the past considered historical, but also now increasingly the personal and private registers of experiences and memories not neatly folded into any grand narrative. The paper is a first attempt at excavating what Reinhart Koselleck aptly has described as sediments of time (2018), exploring the forms of sedimentation of time that Syrians reflecting on the past are starting to embark on in their reflections on what has come to pass. Such reflections lead me to a conversation with Veena Das’ readings of violence and the work of time (2000, 2007). Tracking the unfolding human powers of making history, of unleashing destruction as well as coming to terms with defeat and disappointment is but a feeble attempt at orienting the scholarly debate to the writing and rewriting of history as what Syrian author Mohammad Al Attar in conversation with Lisa Wedeen, Lina Sinjab and Alma Salem recently formulated<sup>2</sup> as an attempt to create a ‘realistic narrative of hope, and not a nostalgia of the revolution’.

### **Pensiveness and Spaces of Reflection**

A central concern of this paper is to reflect on the role history has for exiled Syrians reflecting on the past ten years. History and reflections on the past take on a particular

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/42502> - last accessed on June 24<sup>th</sup> 2021.

salience, when people experience major upheavals. For Syrians – as for Egyptians, Tunisians, and Yemenites – a high-pitched sense of not merely witnessing history but actively writing it with one's actions was a marked experience in late 2010 and during at least the early part 2011 (cf. Schielke 2017, Armbrust 2019, Porter 2017). At that time, taking the streets was by many actors seen as the only right thing to do. In Eelco Runia's insightful treatment, such sublime historical events presents a certain 'readiness to put a way of life, a culture, on the line' (2014: 8). To some extent, this was a time of and for actions and not one of reflection and pause. As Paul Virilio would say, revolutions are about speed and tempo, to allow for drastic accelerations towards change (2006[1977]). The moment of the uprising allowed Syrians to see themselves as one, as one of the slogans frequently chanted had it: "*Wahid, wahid, wahid, al-shab al-suri wahid!*" [One, one, one, the Syrian people are one!]

In a Syrian context, what moved people may not have been the same in the southern city of Deraa as in cities such as Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. However, the initial feeling that past and entrenched forms of politics were about to fall led to an outpouring and coming together of people moved collectively. New alliances and friendships were forged (Brønds 2017) and different and repressed memories were resuscitated from neglect. As Salwa Ismail has shown, past violence from the 1980s was readily readdressed in light of the regime's violent assault on the uprising in the present (2018). The sense of change accordingly opened different registers of action as it awakened memories from nebulous violence in Hama in 1982. This was a moment of change.

With the passing of time, the tempo and immediacy of the events has changed. The regime succeeded in defeating the uprising. Accordingly, it is well known that the world has witnessed a massive displacement and upheaval both inside Syria as well as to the neighboring Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey and beyond to European destinations, Canada and the US. With the protracted nature of the Syrian tragedy, the tempo today ten years after the hopeful beginnings are not marked by urgency of action but by the slower pace of reflection or a living on and with what came to pass. Some Syrians keep the past open by referring to 'al-thawra' [the revolution], while others now talk about 'al-ahdath' [the happenings] as a piecemeal way of getting on with life. As Theodor Adorno would have it in *Minima Moralia*, such reflections on a damaged life opens up for different registers of thought and senses of impossibility. More particularly, it also opens up for a space of pensiveness, which albeit painful and hurting, is a critical move toward keeping the past alive without falling prey to neither cynicism nor uncritical forms of nostalgia, regret, and remorse. Pensiveness, I here take from Jacques Rancière, who addresses the virtue of such slow engagement. In his *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009[2008]), Rancière describes pensiveness as a certain state of being overtaken by thoughts. Or in his formulation (ibid.: 107): "In pensiveness, the act of thinking seems to be encroached upon by a certain passivity." Such thinking opens spaces of possibility, where a coming to terms with and through narrative as well as visual representation are worked out not in order to accept what has happened, but in order to understand it. In Rancière's work, pensiveness – as well as intolerability – is connected to images, which alongside and in tandem with narratives present ways of addressing human experience and redress.

Ethnographically, pensiveness is not a virtue for the few, rather it is a condition, which all actors in different ways may find themselves thrown into, certainly in the aftermath of war and tragedy. Engaging the Syrian tragedy necessitates what Veena Das describes as a descent

into the ordinary (2007), which may lead to a different form of meditation on the ways taken during conflict, or what could – or should have been known – and what to retain for keeping the past for future reengagements. In Eelco Runia’s apt phrasing (2014: 6) “Coming to terms with a historical trauma is the result of answering the commemorative question ‘Who are we that this could have happened?’” Answering such a hard question forces us to tack between what happened, accepting the course of events, while keeping on to the promise, which initially sparked the fatal events (Haugbølle and Bandak 2017). Accordingly, we need to assert a particular tension between endings, *eschaton*, and the end, *telos*, in order to reflect on the work of time and the lasting imprint of what happened on the sediments and sedimentation that are taking place in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising. Pensiveness, I posit, is a critical way to keep open the factuality of past events, while admitting to the changing registers of experience and circumstances being lived through in the time coming after what happened.

### **Sediments of Time and the Rewriting of History**

Obviously one key feature of history is to single and sort things, events and person’s deeds out for later evocation. In Hannah Arendt’s profound reading of ancient and modern concepts of history, we see how the role of memory is critical, that history albeit changing in scope and character, needs to keep store of deeds, of immortalizing them to safeguard them for posterity (1958, 1993[1961], see also White 1980, Hartog 2015). In Arendt’s treatment of the modern concept of history, she argues for a disregard of taking side, be that in national interest, or in one’s own favor. She deliberately advocates for discarding (1993 [1961]: 51): “the alternative of victory or defeat, which moderns have felt expresses the ‘objective’ judgment of history itself, and does not permit it to interfere with what is judged to be worthy of immortalizing praise.” Where this may be an obvious lesson for critical scholarship, it is a hard ideal to aspire to, when located in a context of immediate war, conflict, and tragedy.

Reinhart Koselleck extends a similar line of thought across several of his brilliant essays in the recently released *Sediments of Time. On Possible Histories* (2018). In this collection published posthumously, Koselleck unravels the diverse configurations of time and experience also known in his seminal *Futures Past* (2004[1979]). Koselleck observes that particular events in history will mark the consciousness on either side of any divide, or in his wording (2018: 105): “participants experienced particular thrusts of events as high points of all previous histories, whether they belonged to the victors or the vanquished, although the vanquished were often compelled to write better, more clear-sighted histories.” On his understanding, history is constantly being rewoven and rewritten. He even writes about a retroactive effect upon the past, which by viewing history as singular incidences impacting on each other allows for a general and generalized understanding of the location of the subject in it. However, such a retroactive effect, Koselleck asserts, needs to be understood as part of a continuous rewriting of history. Such rewriting is a trait of all times, needing new histories for new presents, or in his words (2018: 113): “History always has to be rewritten, not only because of new sources are discovered but also because times themselves change.”

The clear and neat division between winners and losers in the game of history, is further complicated by Koselleck, when he asserts that (2018: 215): “not every victory remains a victory, nor every defeat a defeat.” The malleability of experience but also the ongoingness of

time complicates the neatness of binary categorizations in what is presented and understood as history. Or, as Koselleck continues (ibid.): “It thus is not just victory or defeat but also the kind of victory and the kind of defeat that lead to numerous refractions in the formation of consciousness, such that it becomes difficult to define minimal commonalities of collective spaces of consciousness.” Adding to this insight, we could also point to the work of David Scott in deciphering the failed Grenada Revolution (1979-1983), of which he writes (2014: 29): “They succeeded. They failed.” The tragic experience of failing happened on the background of hopes and a social experiment, which attests to the human freedom and capability of initiating actions, with dire consequences that never quite could be anticipated.

In getting a more concise understanding of how memory and consciousness are formed in the wake of war, Koselleck devotes attention to the influence of the two world wars in France and Germany on consciousness. Interrogating survivor experiences present a formidable chance for Koselleck to think towards a theorization of the different layers of consciousness at play. Time is sedimented in both obvious, felt and experienced ways, which may be articulated by historical actors themselves. However, Koselleck also asserts different sediments of time beyond such and their memories and stories that is beyond the immediate grasp of the historical actors themselves. The important layers of historical experience Koselleck points to are hence singularity of experience, structures of repetition and the preconditions and *pregivens* of experience (2018: 215; see also p. 4-9).

We here encounter a field, where recent anthropological reflection and work has already produced significant interventions. Charles Stewart has in his joint work with Eric Hirsch (2005) advocated for ethnographies of historicity (see also Stewart 2016). The move towards addressing historicity is one, which is conceived to elucidate the ways temporal ordering is made sense of and construed in social terms. In their formulation (ibid.: 262): “by considering that ‘historicity’ describes a human situation in flow, where versions of the past and future (of persons, collectives or things) assume present form in relation to events, political needs, available cultural forms and emotional dispositions.” They deliberately contrast the notion of ‘history’ as an adding up of events with ‘historicity’, which on their exposition (ibid.): “focuses on the complex temporal nexus of past-present-future. Historicity, in our formulation, concerns ongoing social production of accounts of pasts and futures.”

In conversation with this conceptualization, Simon Coleman has proposed the term ‘historiopraxy’ (2011). Historiopraxy, in Coleman’s outline, is formulated to hone in on the agency social actors have in using their past moving towards or even jumping into the future. In his formulation (ibid.: 435): “As a term, it has some similarities with the phenomenologically rooted notion of historicity developed by Hirsch and Stewart [...] What I preserve for historiography is a stronger, *proleptic* sense of *making* the future, or more precisely of creating a present that, from the perspective of the future, will be recognised to *have been* a radical transformation.” Where Coleman underscores such agentive uses of the past, of historiopraxy, I find it useful to see the discrepant dimensions he finds in his material. Coleman asserts that historiopraxy can alternate between a ‘making’ of history and an ‘invoking’ of history. These modalities both imply action and recourse to the past, however the degree to which agency is asserted varies.

In these different conceptualizations, we see that the ordering of time actively involves actors, who use and mobilize the past in orienting their present and future. The circumstances

for doing so, however, allow for plural engagements with the past, and even plural pasts to coexist (Henig 2018). And, this is where the aftermath of historical events situates actors with disappointed hopes and hence private and individual memories, which no longer are carried forward by a social impetus. In David Scott's eloquent wording (2014: 6): "[W]hat we are left with are *aftermaths* in which the present seems stricken with immobility and pain and ruin; a certain experience of temporal *afterness* prevails in which the trace of futures past hangs like the remnant of a voile curtain over what feels uncannily like an endlessly extending present." Such afterness may easily draw people towards grief and mourning over what was. This is almost unavoidable. However, in the active rethinking and grappling with what came to pass, there is also a remedy of reasserting the value of what happened even if nothing ended as was hoped for.

### **"We lost the war for freedom... But we didn't lose our narrative!": Engaging Ali Atassi**

In late April, I host a meeting on zoom with Syrian director Ali Atassi, who is based in Beirut. We met first time some years back at a workshop but have not been in contact of late. Atassi is known for his critical role in making documentaries featuring Syrian intellectuals such as Riyadh al-Turk both in 2001 with *Ibn al-Am* and also more recently in *Ibn al-Am Online* from 2012 but also for initiating *Bidayat*, literally Beginnings launched in 2013, which is a collective of artists and intellectuals, which assists Syrian artists and filmmakers. *Bidayat* also publishes a highly important intellectual magazine under the same name with leading critics and intellectuals engaging art, politics and contemporary culture.<sup>3</sup> On an overall level, the Syrian tragedy sparked an enormous effort to document the uprising and the destinies and stories of Syrian actors of all walks of life. *Bidayat* has had a central role in educating and forming part of this conversation as the Syrian uprising turned violent, and the regime brutally forced Syrian activists and civilians to flee.

In an interview with *Syria Untold*<sup>4</sup>, Atassi explains in more elaborate terms: "With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, a new generation emerged in covering the hopes and tragedies of the Syrian revolution. A new space to rebel and create emerged, which accompanied the birth of a new cinematic language, different ways of filming, and different forms of cinematic expression. These ways of making cinema were different from the approach of the [government-affiliated] General Organization of Cinema, which focused on fictional movies with higher budgets."

The documentary, which serve as a background for the conversation with Atassi is his *Baladna Rahib*, or in English *Our Terrible Country* featuring the prominent Syrian intellectual and regime critic Yassin al-Haj Saleh. Al-Haj Saleh is known as a persistently outspoken critic of the regime, who both in Arabic and in translated works has called for an understanding of the regime's nefarious politics (cf. 2017). The film is a moving testimony to al-Haj Saleh's clarity and courage as it follows him in the early phases of the uprising, his cordial and trustful cooperation with the young activist Ziad al-Homsi, and his move from

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<sup>3</sup> See their website for more information: <https://bidayatmag.com/en/english> - last accessed on October 17<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>4</sup> <https://syriauntold.com/2020/07/17/from-exile-in-beirut-cinematic-beginnings/> - last accessed on June 17<sup>th</sup> 2021.

besieged parts of Damascus to his childhood city of Raqqa only finally to being forced into exile arriving in Turkey.

The film is moving on many accounts. It is moving because al-Haj Saleh with enormous clear sight and dignity is presented as he is forced to leave his wife and partner Samira Khalil. It is moving because the film with a camera follows al-Haj Saleh on his path, which ends up not as a victory but as the defeat of his dreams and hopes of a peaceful revolution. The film is also moving as the viewer, or many viewers, will know, that Samira was abducted in 2013 never to be heard from again. The film is moving because we follow the demise of a dream, a hope, and a future, which seemed to be within grasp at that moment. The documentary allays these hopes and follow al-Haj Saleh on his travel through a country, which is being destroyed by the regime and later also from the so-called Islamic State. What we watch is hence a futures past in Koselleck's sense, a particular moment with a specific horizon of expectation and space of possibility (2004[1979]).

In the film, we do not only meet al-Hajj Saleh but also the young activist, Ziad al-Homsi, who at this point is in his early twenties. Al-Homsi's cordial and respectful relationship with al-Haj Saleh is similarly touching. The two men from different generations share the same hopes, and also come to share the same fate while travelling towards Raqqa. We hear their profound conversations on what is happening, while we as viewers are situated in a markedly different present. We know that their moment in the unfolding chain of events is carrying them towards tragedy, while we are witnessing the enormous dignity with which they both carry on their assiduous labor of thinking and remembering despite the violence and destruction they face.

Atassi is very frank and forthcoming in our conversation. He starts by telling of the cooperation with Ziad al-Homsi, a theme he explains that he will return to later. Atassi explains how he felt a need to document Yassin al-Haj Saleh and his life. At the same time, he is also very clear-sighted in relation to the specificities of the film being his own personal reading of al-Haj Saleh. He explains and repeats that he felt 'a need to document'. Further to this, Atassi explains that as seen from today the enterprise back then was marked by: 'not very rational decisions'. The sense of time was different, Atassi says: "We thought it was a matter of weeks, not months, back then!" In a sense, it all just unraveled. He pauses, and says: "We were anticipating something different!" Atassi also explains the intricacies of Samira, Yassin's wife, and her decision not to leave Damascus, and the area of al-Ghouta, and Duma. The same goes for her fellow friend and activist Razan Zeitouneh, who was abducted alongside Samira in 2013. Zeitouneh also was never heard from again.

Atassi explains of the decision of al-Haj Saleh to actually travel to Raqqa at that point. "We thought it would take a week, but it ended up taking five weeks!" Further to this, Atassi explains how ISIS was taking over Raqqa with dire consequences for Yassin's brothers. To add to this, Atassi, himself already since long on the black list of the regime, explains about his choice to go on a journey on his own to meet with al-Haj Saleh and al-Homsi in Raqqa. With a laughter he explains how he had to grow a full beard to Raqqa to go incognito. "Today I see it as stupid!" he exclaims. After a short pause, Atassi asserts the following: "We have to see it from the perspective of that moment... It was a particular moment..." He in this sense explains how things were done at this moment, which now in retrospect appears rather differently.

Atassi elaborates on the film, explaining that it is: “Not only about the journey, but how I as a director in the editing room tell the story.” In that vein, Atassi asserts that the film gestures at what he calls a “public visibility of the left in society.” In the course of the conversation, Atassi centers on two scenes from the film, which he sees as highly important. These scenes are both in al-Haj Saleh’s engagement with ordinary people. The first scene is one, where he ends in a heated discussion with an elderly man and restaurant owner in Gaziantep, the second shows a scene in Duma, in greater Damascus, where al-Haj Saleh is trying to convince people to do a cleaning the street project with very little success.

Ali asserts that his film is a documentation of a period marked by secular and peaceful movements just before they were overtaken by jihadist groups and a wider radicalization. He explains about Yassin’s approval of the movie, when he first watched it. Later when Samira was abducted, he was less happy about it, or in Atassi’s formulation: “Yassin would tell his story differently!”

Atassi explains of the high cost the film ended having for Ziad. He toured with the film but on an occasion went back to Turkey, and to Idlib. Ziad was captured and put under torture by Jeish al-Islam, an islamist group, and ended up confessing to have changed his positions and as no longer subscribing to the same position as aired in the film. Atassi sighs, and describes Ziad as a: “traumatized and psychologically not stable anymore.”

In the end of our conversation, Atassi raises the perspective. “We need a self-conscious reflection on our own roles. We were not able to face our own destiny. And we have to reflect on the enemies within and outside, which allowed this to pass.” Atassi thinks for a short while before continuing: “Now is a time of reflection and critique. We lost the war for freedom... But we didn’t lose our narrative! What we are doing now is about what narrative, which will prevail.”

A little later responding to some of my questions on the important changes in visual culture and what these changes imply for the possible audiences, perspectives and identifications, Atassi says: “We have archives, people and narratives! We have different tools beyond the cinema... It is about a narrative battle. We need to be more honest, to discuss and complicate the established narrative... We are building for the future.” After a short pause, Atassi asserts: “In the Syrian case, reality is beyond fiction!”

### **“Yes, we lost. But we still have our memory”: Engaging Rami Farah**

Indeed the Syrian reality seems to transcend fiction with the horrors unleashed. However, the actual engagement with concrete persons is a highly important avenue for not just Ali Atassi, but also documentarists like Waad al-Kateab, Yasmin Fedda, Firas Fayad, Obaida Zeitoun, and Rami Farah. All these documentarists have made heartbreaking documentaries covering the realities of the Syrian tragedy. All documentaries assert the need to keep store of what happened both for individual lives as well as for the broader context and story of the Syrian tragedy. In the following I shall focus on the work of Rami Farah in order to reflect on the ways he is addressing the need for engaging memories of the past in their own right but also from the side of ordinary citizens and exiled Syrians.

On a Thursday morning in mid-May, we have scheduled a zoom conversation with Syrian documentarist Rami Farah at 10 am. We have for long awaited this moment as the corona-restrictions made it impossible for us to meet physically, when Rami supported by International Media Support was editing his film in Copenhagen at the Kong Gulerod Studio [King Carrot Studios] in December 2020. Rami Farah is living in Paris and has over the last couple of years established himself as an important and reflective documentarist with the films *A Comedian in a Syrian Tragedy* (2020) and *Our Memory Belongs to Us* (2021).

As Rami is delayed for today's meeting, we have a conversation in the group, while waiting. We talk about the importance of the two films Rami Farah has produced. And the films are very important as they both portrays significant aspects of the Syrian tragedy. The first film centers on the famous Syrian actor Fares Helou, which the film follows as he joins the revolution and comes under attack from the regime. Helou ends up fleeing Syria to France, and the movie follows this move, which also has become Rami Farah's own fate. Rami's own voice is important in the film even if we hardly see him in front of the camera. He sets the scene from the beginning of the film, where former president Hafiz al-Assad in black and white footage is shown, when he seized power in Syria with a coup in 1970: "As soon as I woke up I saw his image." Celebrating masses and the waving al-Assad features. "Hafiz al-Assad. The unconditional father." Rami Farah continues as we see scouts and youth carrying the Syrian flag in the streets. Farah continues: "The beginnings of fear. Every time I closed my eyes I saw him watching me." Rami Farah's own story is hence reflected in his narration of events. We follow the events by zooming in on Fares Helou, who as a Syrian actor chose to speak out against the regime and join the peaceful revolution. With dire consequences as he was forced to escape to France, where he now resides in exile.

Two scenes are exemplary for the way Helou's story is narrated. We follow Helou in his endeavor of building an art space in al-Bustan, while still in Syria. The art space is to be an open space for artists doing all sorts of exhibitions and performances. We feel the energy Helou is putting into the makings of the space. However, with his speaking up against the regime the art space is destroyed by regime thugs. We then watch a scene, where Fares Helou talks on the phone with various persons from the regime trying to either sweet talk him into coming back to their ranks, or another wry officer who bluntly and with sheer force is trying to cajole him into submitting to authority. Fares Helou cannot go back. He is targeted as a popular figure, but also as a Syrian hailing from a Christian background and accordingly critical for the regime narrative of it being against Islamic extremists and terrorists.

Later we follow Fares in Paris. He stays with a Syrian acquaintance, who starts to question Fares' narrative. Hence, the reflection on whether the revolution was worth the effort and price is put on Fares Helou. Devoid of the fame and importance bestowed upon him in Syria, Helou's life in Paris is somewhat more humble. Life goes on, surely, but life in exile is markedly different from the hopes and elated spirits of the early revolution. We are presented with an uprooted figure, who is tied to the revolutionary moment but cut lose and is trying to find his footing in France.

The second film is rather different. *Our Memory Belongs to Us* follows three Syrians in exile, namely Odai, Rani and Yadan, who are summoned by Rami Farah to meet in Paris to talk about what happened in Syria. The three men all live in different European countries and the film therefore is an exercise in bringing them back to reflect on what happened. Odai, Rani

and Yadan all were part of the very start of the uprisings in Syria in Deraa. They were engaged in filming the events and had an arrangement to film and document the unfolding events and send their footage out to Rami. Rami Farah received the footage, 12.756 videos, and has for this film arranged for four days of collective watching of these videos on the stage of a cinema in Paris. This microcosm of friends on stage, reorganizing events and talking about their hopes, their fears, and the lost friends and even loss of home presents a cathartic moment. The three men reasserts their memories in their laughter and tears. Indeed there is no way back, but there is no way forward if not through their engaging each other. Poignant scenes abound, and Rami Farah is also frequently a figure on the scene talking with Odai, Rani and Yadan on the footage and their reactions to it. At several places, Yadan asks for the camera to stop filming, which Rami respects. This respect and dignity accordingly is given back to these three ordinary persons. Significantly, the film ends by Rami asserting his voice and narrative alongside the one of Odai, Rani and Yadan. One of their friends, Abu Nimr, who is a major presence in the film was killed by the regime, while filming and documenting what was happening. Abu Nimr's death was captured on camera. As the three men are about to watch this scene, Yadan asks Rami not to show it, saying: "I don't want to remember him that way!" Rami respects this choice. However, after ending the scene on the stage in Paris, the film ends with this very scene of Abu Nimr being shot dead by a sniper as he crosses a dangerous street. We hear Rami's voice concluding the movie, saying: "I chose to remember."

Accordingly, both films seem to bespeak a kind of departure in terms of allowing a space for pensiveness and thought in Syrian documentaries. Mahmoud, one of the students active in my research project has a Syrian background and was himself active in the uprisings before being forced to leave Syria. Mahmoud tells of the importance of the *Our Memory Belongs to Us*. As he states: "It opens up for thought. It was very special to watch it. Many of the other Syrian documentaries you just watch. I couldn't do it with this one without having to pause and think. As I told you, Andreas, I remember where I first was, when I saw the film, when the first two were shot... The film makes space for thinking and for remembering..." And indeed it does. It does so by allowing ordinary Syrians impacted by the tragedy to watch, stop and talk about the events in their own words, and hence asserting their versions of the course of events.

We finally get hold of Rami via Messenger. Apparently, he forgot our meeting and is now rushing back from a café in Paris to his apartment for our zoom conversation. About twenty minutes to eleven, Rami finally makes it. He is deeply sorry about the delay even if we are trying to convince him that we are the ones being grateful for his time.

We open our conversation with a round of introductions and my outline of our project. Rami is immediately reflecting with us on the stakes of the archiving processes but also of the different generations holding different positions and memories regarding what happened. "The older generation lived in Syria and has to reconstruct their memories now..." Rami posits and then goes on: "The younger generation, by contrast, has a different memory. Their memory structure is different." He then gives an example of an exercise he did with Syrian kids in Lebanon drawing their self-portrait. As Rami explains, they did not hold any memories before the bombs struck. "Everything in Syria before was fake!" Rami then exclaims. He elaborates and explains how he sees the idea of images as evidence and proof as particularly important then, when it all happened. As Rami says: "They rested on a common

cause and a shared identity. Now after ten years it is a different approach, it is about our own archive, our own narratives and not about collective experience.” A little later he asserts his own ambition: “We give the narrative back...”

After this initial opening, Rami with a generous and open gesture asks if this responds to the opening I did. We then talk about the change of title to *Our Memory Belongs to Us* on the second film. This much better capture the meaning – also in Arabic – Rami says. Asked about what Rami wants to accomplish with the film, he responds: “The film is both for now and for the future...” He explains that this also implies making the international community aware of the persisting role of the regime in perpetrating violence. Rami adds to this by explaining how by allowing embassies to open, legitimacy and authority will be given to the regime. Rami then makes us all aware of where we are, namely in Denmark. “It is also important to be show the film in Denmark with the current situation...” Hereby Rami points to the fact the Danish authorities at the time of writing still are intending to send back Syrians to the Damascus area as it is deemed ‘safe’. Rami pauses before he goes on: “It is also important for my daughter, she needs to understand how it all was.” He then explains how his own family was from the Golan Heights and that they were displaced in 1967. “I had questions for my parents, and I expect my daughter will have this to me as well.”

Rami then explains the problematic situation regarding the active denial that the Syrian regime is orchestrating currently. “The statue which was taken down in Dera is now back up... We need to keep [hold of] these moments.” Rami explains.

Mahmoud asks a question regarding the choice of characters for *Our Memory Belongs to Us* and the decision to make the film on Fares Helou. Rami responds: “The films imposed themselves on me!” He explains how Fares Helou was a known figure in Syria, a secular Christian, and how the film follows him in Syria and then into exile. The initial plan was to follow Fares in Syria, which Rami had done for a long time. With the change of Syrian reality a concomitant shift of orientation presented itself on Rami. As he says, he had to: “change from revolution to this film, which is just as much about exile.” Rami explains the difference between the position of the camera in the film project. “In Syria I was holding the camera all of the time, I had to be fast and ready to go. In France, the camera was on the table. It gives a different notion of time...”

In the second film, he explains how he was in Copenhagen in 2013 meeting up with Signe Byrge Sørensen from the Danish Film Institute. However, what for Rami was a straightforward and highly significant story here lacked, he searches for the word, and then says common sense – supported by his partner Lyana Salem, who also was a producer on the film. He explains about the idea of getting Odai, Rani, and Yadan to meet in Jordan, but that they could not make it. There were supposed to meet for Yadan’s wedding. So this time it was only Yadan on a theatre stage in Jordan, and not the others. The others were skyped in. Rami then explains how the idea of the stage and the filming of the conversation came about. “I studied theatre and I feel secure on the stage... As a dancer, I toured the world and performed in many different places. I feel at home on the stage. It is taking me out of time and space, whether Odai, Yadan and Rani were in the Netherlands, the UK... We wanted to take the persons out of their context... This film gave us the tools to do this.” Rami returns to the theme of common sense and explains that it exactly could be presented and talked about on stage. “The real context is where I belong”, he asserts.

Lyana jumps into the conversation. She explains how different the films were conceived. With Fares Helou, she explains, Rami got to follow him. “The film was his destiny. Rami started to work on the other film, and had a research period, a lot of things were taking place...” Lyana explains that it was about separating narratives. “It was about the revolution, how did it start, how it became militarized, Islamized, internationalized...” She also explains how the second film was about Yadan, Rani and Odai. “The stage was like an exterior eye, provoking the insider and outsider to feel the same as on stage...”

Lyana explains how they met up with Janus and Signe in Denmark, and the complexities in conveying the basics of what had taken place in Syria. Lyana describes it as “history telling, what it is about...” Rami gives an example. “For instance, why are demonstrations shown from behind, why not in front of the demonstration? Why only men?” Rami explains: “It was a particular moment!” He pauses and then says: “The image does not say it all!” And again: “This led to the aesthetics and style of the film...”

I take the word at this point in the conversation, asking to the particular dignity of the characters presented, that they all come across as very powerful in their integrity. Rami responds. “I was observing and just following Fares, we were experiencing the end of the Syrian regime!” He sighs. “I was naïve, I didn’t see what was happening...” Rami explains the details around the second film as being very different. “I had 12.756 videos and 4 days of shooting. Here it was on how their lives were affected...” He elaborates further on this. “We chose 18. March because it was here the statue was destroyed... It was a start [for them] to narrate their own stories, to fix the narrative and give dignity back to people!”

Our conversation then moves on to the relationship between ordinary and extraordinary people in the two films. Rami explains how he probably has shot more than 1.000 hours with Fares. “I see my own naivety in the footage... To go with the revolution, where a lot is not shown...” He continues to explain that there was no relevant cinema scene. Regarding the film on Fares, he says: “The film was not about the actor, but about the activist! What does it mean to be an independent artist...” Lyana accompanies Rami: “Fares Helou is a huge star in the Arab world... Fares wanted to think out of the box, he has a rebellious trait.” She continues: “He was like an actor with no script.” She describes him as ‘so charismatic’. Lyana further explains how he was joining the story. “For the love of the story, but a different story.”

She then jumps to the newest film explaining the ‘years and years of meeting with Odai, Yadan and Rani. And Rami is Syrian so their story is his story.’ Lyana explains how Rami never went to Dera but he had the relationship with the characters. Lyana contrasts this with Fares: “It was risky with Fares. At first, it was safe because of Fares, then it became risky with the Syrian regime’s actions... All became equal after the revolution, and even more so in France.” She pauses and elaborates: “You loose your ground beneath” Lyana explains how the situation changed. “The revolution and [what comes] after is always different. Yes, we lost. But we still have our memory. It is the most important tool.” Again she pauses before saying: “We need to protect it. We need an authentic narrative, this is the treasure, Rami is speaking about... There is a power when memories are created now. This is very important!”

Talking about the material and the quality of the many videos, Rami reiterates the exact number being 12.756 videos. “A big percentage was shaky and blurred.” At any rate, the footage allowed for a different form of intervention and telling of reality. This was not

unframed but chosen in order to circumvent the traffic in what Rami calls 'graphic images'. Lyana and Rami both point to the way Syria has been turned into a global repository of violent images of destruction and violence. Rami then says: "My nightmares need not be relived in the context of films." Thinking for a brief spell, he continues by explaining that people: "are traumatized as they are denied memories." Bringing this back to the second film: "On stage in the theatre there is a space of reflection between them and the screen." Lyana adds a qualification of the protracted nature of the Syrian situation, and then extorts: "Why the graphic images?" She explains how Syrians always are inserted in a frame of extreme violence. "This led us to make this film, to keep the violent photos out. To keep it out in order to reflect on it..." She continues this line of thought: "We need to control the memories, therefore we chose the images for what we needed to shed light on. We need to confront what happened to us!"

### **As it Were: Critical Events and the Work of Time**

In the work of Syrian documentarists such as Ali Atassi and Rami Farah we see the changed conditions for telling and showing what happened in Syria. The revolutionary present is long gone, but its after-effect is still alive albeit on a much more personal level. The general problem here is how to keep and protect such memories, to keep that reality alive and present the narratives of what happened without romanticizing. Here documentaries present themselves as a particular way to narrate events, to make feelings palatable and to offer a space of pensiveness. The various engagements with the past in the work and reflections of Ali Atassi and Rami Farah gives what Catherine Elgin (2017) has called 'epistemic access' to the efforts of living on with what happened. It does so by opening up our understanding to the work of time on the experiences and narratives of what was. It does so by playing with the fidelity of staying true to the memories and documentations of particular persons' lives in the unfolding of events, while situating those presents as forms of futures past. Fixing the narrative, as formulated by Lyana Salem and Rami Farah, accordingly plays on ambiguity of the 'as it were'. By moving from the collective to the personal, the narrative forms and memories also move towards new articulations, where pause and reflection becomes critical. Hereby we also see a way to sunder the modalities of the politics of 'as if', which has been so instrumental for the Syrian regime's fashioning of its subjects (Wedeen 1999, 2019, Bandak 2014, 2015b). By having its citizens acting 'as if' they inadvertently would revere the president, party and state-forged reality, the system were upheld even if this staging was something many Syrians would be only reluctantly persuaded by, if at all. In moving to the modality of 'as it were', we are afforded a different frame, which engages the temporal ordering and allows the work of time to become visible by playing off on the intersecting yet diverse registers of the past, present, and future.

Das eloquently captures the relationship between temporality and narrative in her work on violence in an Indian context. When attending to violence and unsettling forms of brutality, Das contends, we may need to stand back and avoid easy conclusions and fast opinions. In her formulation (2000: 59; 2007: 80): "The *work* of time, not its image or representation, is what concerns me here." A general line of thought here is that healing, or a coming to terms with what has passed, implies a descent into the ordinary or the everydayness (cf. Das 2007). Hereby we are pointed to the critical role stories have in establishing a sense of control over

one's narrative, a point which anthropologist Michael Jackson has unraveled across his oeuvre (1998, 2002, 2005). Jackson frequently points Hannah Arendt's reading of the human condition as constantly torn by situations, where the human actor finds herself an object of others decisions and actions, and the reverse, situations, where the human actor finds herself to be the subject and narrator of her life (1998[1958]). Thus, Jackson designates this hard balance as an existential imperative, which is a trait seen cross-culturally albeit circumstances and articulations obviously vary. Violence inscribes memories vividly on the bodies and minds of the victims and witnesses, and any accommodation herewith may seem like a Herculean struggle. Violence on the one hand freezes the normal flow of experience and articulation, arresting time's flow. On the other, what comes after attests to life as ongoing, even if guilt, shame and uneasiness with having survived may mark those living on. Time, inadvertently goes on, but never as quite the same. Violence accordingly afford a particular haunting of memories, as what one would want to leave behind, but which constantly may be re-activated, willingly or unwillingly (Bandak and Coleman 2019, Bryant 2010). The need for time to move on also presents a paradox as, in moral terms, a moving on cannot happen without in some measure learning to live with one's actions and their consequences.

One of the key faculties allowing for such a transition is storytelling, the ability to allow the work of time to happen in a retaking of one's own narrative. However, not necessarily an easy and straight narrative but rather a messy and constantly worked towards achievement. In Veena Das' formulation such a narrative (2000: 66): "is not something which reveals itself in an elegant linear movement. It is rather like a text that has been scratched over and written many times." Later, in a revised version of the text, Das, extends this line of thought, when she writes (2007: 87): "The ability to speak the violence is within the recesses of this culture of performance and storytelling, within the domains of family and kinship. Time is not purely something represented but is an agent that 'works' on relationships – allowing them to be reinterpreted, rewritten, sometimes overwritten – as different social actors struggle to author stories in which collectivities are created or re-created."

Time may indeed work on the consciousness of both individual actors as well as the broader social webs in which, one is inscribed. Michael Lambek also has been instrumental in his anthropological work on the weight of the past for social thought and wellbeing (2002). One of his insights, which bears directly on the points made by Jackson and Das is the role of assuming some kind of agency over the narrative over historical events. Lambek accordingly ties ethics to our sense of history, and our narration of the past. In his formulation (2010: 58): "There is a lesson of wide relevance here. Taking responsibility for historical events, acknowledging our role in them, is not only the way to make peace but also turns people from the victims of history into its agents and finds in suffering not resentment or *ressentiment* but forgiveness and conciliation."

Perhaps this is too much asked. However, acknowledging that one was and forever will be marked by the events of a moment as decisive as the Syrian uprising is a starting point for engaging personally on the ways 'history' happened and one's role in it without falling into neither nostalgia nor romanticizing. Svetlana Boym, professor of Slavic Studies and Comparative Literature, elaborates on the various forms and uptakes of nostalgia. Nostalgia may frequently be seen as patently bound on an idealized past, on phantasies with no bearing on the future as when Appadurai talks of 'imagined nostalgia' as a nostalgia 'for things that never were' (Appadurai 1996: 77, see also Özyürek 2006). However, on Boym's reading we

need to discern different forms and uptakes of nostalgia as she points to both a restorative and a reflective modality of nostalgia (2001: 41ff.). Critically, she points out that restorative nostalgia is bound to the reestablishment of past order that it evokes national pasts as well as futures. Reflective nostalgia has a different openness to its pointing to memory aspects in cultural and individual terms. In one of Boym's formulations, she presents it as follows (2001: 49): "Re-flection suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis. The focus here is not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and passage of time." As such, Boym points to the role of such reflective nostalgia is to allow for critical thinking even if it may frequently be fragmentary and inconclusive. Reflective nostalgia is a going-back that allows for a moving forward, not a going-back in order to turn back time. Nostalgia in its reflective modality opens up for a meditation on the relation between past, present and future. However, this happens not because of ease and accommodation with the past but rather due to the pain and (ibid.: 50) "defamiliarization and sense of distance that drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present and future."

Such reflective work, and such freedom of reflection has certainly come with a high cost for Syrians in or outside the country's national boundaries. However by allowing reflective re-engagements with the past, the sedimentation of what took place can be given a more mature and conscious form, and perhaps, perhaps, also become the potential for new forms of freedom and experimentations beyond the fixity and unfreedom of the Syrian regime. This, as it were, would allow for the work of time but also for an active reworking of time.

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