

**Media Anthropology Network
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)
E-Seminar Series**

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E-Seminar 72

The Cunning Present: On the Siege of Yarmouk, the torn document and the tragicomic

**by
Stefan Tarnowski
University of Copenhagen / University of Cambridge**

**Discussant
Helga Tawil-Suri
New York University**

19 September – 3 October 2023

Dear all,

I would like to announce the opening of our 72nd e-seminar: *The Cunning Present: On the Siege of Yarmouk, the torn document, and the tragicomic* by Stefan Tarnowski (University of Copenhagen/Cambridge University).

The e-seminar will run from today, and until October 3rd.

As usual, first, our discussant, Helga Tawil-Suri (NYU) will post her comments. Subsequently, Stefan will post his reply after which I will open the seminar for all to contribute.

To post a comment to the e-seminar, write directly to medianthro@lists.easaonline.org. You need to be subscribed to the list from the email you are writing from.

If you have not yet had the chance to read it, the paper is available on our website <<https://easaonline.org/networks/media/eseminars>>.

I'm looking forward to the e-seminar.

Cheers,

Nina

Hello mediaanthro members,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to an engaging and thought-provoking essay, “*The Cunning Present: On the Siege of Yarmouk, the torn document, and the tragicomic*,” by Stefan Tarnowski. The essay analyzes the temporality experienced by a young generation of Syrian-Palestinian filmmakers and writers (during a particularly harsh siege on the Yarmouk refugee camp) and how this temporality is expressed in the narrative forms produced in these filmmakers’ and writers’ works. Tarnowski introduces “the cunning present” – a phrase used by one of the filmmakers – as the term through which to understand “the contradictory experience of time passing as **stasis**.”

There are a couple of conceptual explanations or ‘expansions’ that Tarnowski does that are integral to his argument which I found poignant. First, he suggests that we approach and analyze ‘narrative’ as including **both** text and image, thus his essay provides a reading of essays and films, texts and visual scenes. Second, building on Paul Ricoeur, David Scott and others, Tarnowski expands the notion of temporality by arguing that these narrative experiments (the ones analyzed in this essay) not only reflect the feeling of time passing while standing still, but are also constructed on the basis of a generational difference.

I’ll note, before moving on, that my response is more a series of thoughts that sprung up upon reading Tarnowski’s essay than any direct or specific questions about the essay itself (I hope that’s ok!). I found myself captivated by certain phrases and terms. As such, my comments

and questions are not meant as critiques or pointing to any lack in the essay, but a reflection of the provocations that Tarnowski's essay provoked (in the best of ways).

Tarnowski's explanation of what the contradictory feeling and narrative of the cunning present entail is convincing, and the essay does a wonderful job halting us readers, as it were, in the experience, narrative, moment of stasis. Tarnowski brings in a number of phrases and terms that echo "time passing as stasis," such as the wry smile, the tragicomic mode, a collection of inconclusive middles, and the torn document, which add a vivid texture. Given the richness of the narratives (and Tarnowski's account of them), the feeling of being stuck in the wake of defeat, or the foreclosure of the possibility of catharsis, comes through powerfully. The movement that is inherent in pass*ing* however could be further unfolded, I think. I am not suggesting that the contradiction needs to be resolved, since Tarnowski makes clear that it precisely can't and doesn't (being stuck in that moment of unresolved contradiction certainly resonated in the experience and affect of being stuck inside a checkpoint too). Rather, there are (temporal) movement(s) happening which I was curious to see how Tarnowski would follow. Some of these movements occur with the narratives. For example, al-Khatib's films are 'finished' – a moment has been filmed, scenes have been edited, al-Khatib is talking over his clips a few years after the siege... Some of the movements are in the political-historical forces that help create this cunning present, whether in the past, as in the "chronopolitical institutions that *predate* the 2011 Syrian revolution" (emphasis added), or in the siege's aftermath (in the feeling that the siege never really ends, or in the siege becoming "a political concept for re-casting and theorising the past"). I understood these as necessarily dynamic, an *élan* or a movement that didn't engender stasis (of re-bringing the past into the future which is the present moment, even if the (affective?) result is stasis). And some movements are in what happens to cause generational differences.

There is a generational difference that Tarnowski (and the writers and filmmakers) experience and conjure. The elders interpret the time of siege as a recurrence of the past, whereas the younger generation experiences it as being stranded. The difference is profound, and suggests a different temporality, and a different kind of movement. The elders' past experiences were those of displacements, dispersals, defeats which are both ongoing and in certain ways also over: the elders' movement in space-time has already happened (even if in many cases that movement was towards a kind of stasis, such as that of camps, exile, statelessness). I wondered whether a shift in the terms could denote that difference: is one generation perhaps experiencing "time passing as stasis" and the other generation is "passing time" as stasis (in the first time is passing, in the second it's how a person passes time)?

Since the siege of Yarmouk itself plays a constitutive role in the development of the cunning present (or to put it another way, "siege has become an organizing metaphor"), there were descriptions/terms of the siege that were provocative and which I couldn't help but wonder if there was more in these to unpack. The siege of Yarmouk was a violent strategy of literal starvation. Could we think of starvation temporally (in terms of the narratives this engenders)? Can time be starved? What is starved time? Is the hunger, deprivation, drained energy, slowed heartbeat, blurry vision, loss of consciousness, and slow death that starvation results in perhaps a way to also conceive of the siege's temporality? Starvation has specific 'effects' on one's bodily, psychic, sensorial disposition, and by necessity one's experience of time. Starvation changes one's constitution. Can/are the narrative forms 'starved' too? Not in the sense of lack or emaciation, but in how starvation changes the structure of the experience

of time, the mode of being. What are the ‘equivalent’ drains, deprivations, slowness of the narrativity the siege engenders?

Related to starvation, but connecting back to the unresolved contradiction of cunning time, there are interesting overlaps that emerge between starvation and suspension or withholding. Tarnowski writes for example, that the space of Yarmouk was “sealed entirely for anything except hunger.” Hunger/starvation here has a kind of negative momentum, a sucking or hollowing out, it is a kind of retrogressive and degenerating movement, like a black hole which sucks energy out. How does this resonate, although not as violently and harmfully, with the suspension that makes up the “inconclusive form of narrative tension, which offers no resolution to its contradictions”? Are the narrative forms (the cat scene stops before his possible/presumed end, the man sits at/on the checkpoint and is/is not cured, Amer’s essay ends where it began) withholding in a movement similar to starvation? Is the audience/reader being metaphorically starved? And yet, there is a tension, because the writers and filmmakers were “*saturated* by the experience of time under siege” (emphasis added), they have created, an audience/readership is here.

The (visual) scenes described of Abdallah al-Khatib’s presentation of his film clips are powerful and haunting. Reading about these with the understanding that narrative here includes more than textual output, I wondered what the inclusion of sound would add. First, the inclusion of sound (as the spoken word) with respect to the filmmaker’s presentation: he spoke infrequently, sometimes interjected the visual clips, later read a passage from a piece he had written. Second, in terms of the film clips themselves – are they muted, are sounds and images synchronized or disjointed? Third, in terms of the experience of siege and time standing still: What does one who is experiencing siege hear, what sounds does s/he make? Is there silence? Is the stomach grumbling, are the cats howling, are bombs screeching? The experience of sound is not only relegated to what happens in film in Tarnowski’s essay, but also to Tarnowski’s own engagement with his interlocutors and in the experiences and writings of the essays analyzed. For example, in the case of the first, there is an interesting ‘mis-hearing’ in Tarnowski’s mistranslation of ‘torn document’ as ‘interior documentary.’ In the case of the latter, of Ahmed Amer’s writings, there are conversations with a psychiatrist, the difficulty of new languages, and phone calls. All of these seem to also be reflective of and describe a passing while standing still, in the realm of the auditory. My question here may not be immediately answerable (since this isn’t what Tarnowski wrote about), but because the essay provides an ‘expansion’ of what narrativity includes, I wondered why audio wasn’t included and wished to read/see/hear more about the experience and expression of sound at psychic, corporeal, filmic, and conceptual levels.

I’ll end with three minor comments of different kinds: 1) about what may not be necessary in the current essay which is the question of technics and media (and I’m curious if other readers agree); 2) what struck me as potentially important to understanding “the cunning present” but not yet fully developed which is the question of the psychic and psychoanalytic (and could thus be the basis for another piece?); and 3) about the term ‘torn document’ (which helps describe the ‘thing’ that is created as an outcome of experiencing siege, and which also has a fertile psychoanalytic element that I’d love to see developed) being itself perhaps too ‘static’ of a term, and whether, although not an accurate translation, ‘torn document*ary*’ might describe the action of these narrative forms to (attempt to) intervene in the memory of siege.

I hope that you'll gather from the above that this essay had me thinking and wondering about all kinds of questions (in and beyond the essay), and I do apologize if I have diverged too far from the text at hand and its theoretical richness. I do look forward to the ensuing discussion (and reading Stefan's other work) as well as look forward to other mediaanthro members' responses. Thank you, Stefan, for a rich paper.

Helga Tawil-Souri

Stefan Tarnowski

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20 September 2023

Hello Helga and mediaanthro members,

Thank you, Helga, for your generous, incisive and thought-provoking comments. Your reading fully encapsulates the article. I love the idea of incorporating a 'listening' aspect to the essay. I don't know that literature well. I'm open to any suggestions for articles or books that you and the other mediaanthro members think might be relevant for the essay. I also agree that the psychoanalytic and psychic aspects of the paper could be further developed. The only issue, as always, is space constraints.

On the question of technics, I'm torn. On the one hand, because of where this essay sits within a larger book project (or at least within the structure of my PhD dissertation). The book project focusses on various kinds of media activism, such as a chapter on the processes of digital forensics for a potential war crimes tribunal; another chapter on the White Helmets, their GoPro Helmet cams that were supposed to be guarantees of truth-value, and the subsequent disinformation campaigns they became embroiled in; and finally another on an online newspaper called Enab Baladi that still insists on producing a print copy because of a commitment to the idea of a deliberating reading public, but at the same time without any real faith in that idea of a Habermasian public sphere. Etc.

This chapter takes a different stance – it's also about how Abdallah al-Khatib tried to take a different approach. He had a camera and could have easily fallen into some kind of media activism, but didn't. Instead, he filmed footage without any real attempt to capture newsworthy eventfulness; he didn't think he'd make it out of the siege alive, so he also kept sending his footage out with friends who did make the crossing, and he allowed them to use the footage in their films. Through him, I was also introduced to this extraordinary group of writers at Sard. Khaldoun al-Mallah is still in Idlib in northern Syria, writing prolifically, and we correspond regularly. He's getting his first novel published soon. But anyway, the point is that all the conditions were there for Abdallah and the Sard guys to become media activists of some kind, and yet instead they decided to make these strange documents. So technics is there, I think, forming much of the milieu for many, as are the forces of the social, but there's a limit to their explanatory lens when it comes to Abdallah al-Khatib, Khaldoun al-Mallah, and Ahmed Amer – and many of the other Sard writers, or other filmmakers from Ridd Fa'l I didn't have space to include. At the same time, I wanted to think of their intellectual production as formed by a milieu, as existing within an intellectual tradition, rather than the result of some kind of artistic individuality. To borrow a phrase from David Scott, I wanted to show these writers as "both authors and authored".

In the end, as you rightly suggest, Helga, the goal of the paper is to dialogue with David Scott's argument that tragedy might be the appropriate narrative modality for our postcolonial moment, or at least, for our reconciliation with the political projects and struggles of previous generations of anticolonial intellectuals and activists. What I found, I think, in the stances that these writers and filmmakers took towards tragedy as a form of generic emplotment was that it was necessary but insufficient. They didn't try to surpass tragedy as a generic form, but they also, extraordinarily, didn't want to reconcile with defeat, even though they were Palestinians and their elders were telling them not to get involved, and even when they were encircled (physically, temporally, politically, metaphorically) in the most brutal siege of the Syrian revolution and war. That's where the notion of the tragicomic comes in, via a reading of Khaldoun al-Mallah's essay and his reading of Samuel Beckett.

Another element lurking at the back of the idea of the tragicomic, especially in its guise as the wry smile, is Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism. It would be possible, indeed it's tempting, to read the commitment to revolution in the face of siege, or the faithful perseverance with a technology in the face of a very successful disinformation campaign as in the case of the White Helmets, as examples of cruel optimism: a subject unable to relinquish a bad object in spite of its role in hastening their demise because of its constitutive role in the formation of their identity, the kind of attachment the ethnographer can diagnose from what Berlant calls an "analyst's perspective". But on the one hand, the commitment to these objects (a device, a concept) was more tragic than that, it involved having to choose between a series of bad options. I didn't want to take a step out and adopt that analyst's perspective, for all the obvious points about the thickness and thrownness of situations I didn't think it my place to begin to cast judgement on. On the other hand, for Abdallah and co, understanding that one had to choose, or that one had made a choice, didn't involve the kinds of reconciliation with defeat or the 'tragic choice' associated with that genre. Instead, there was an acknowledgement of tragedy alongside an ironic or comic distance from it, a distance that allowed for perseverance to take place. That's what interested me in particular about this narrative mode or even genre that this young generation of writers and filmmakers were toying with.

Finally, to return to Helga's point on torn documentary rather than document. The usual word for documentary is watha'iqi. But actually, I think tawthiq can be considered the verbal noun (masdar of وثَّقَ) so either would work. Maybe that's worth changing. The dictionary gives documentation as the translation. What do others think would work best? Torn document, documentary, or documentation?

I'm going to end there, but wanted to thank you all for reading and engaging. I submitted a bit late, and it was all a bit rushed so I didn't have time to include a footnote thanking you all for reading, and all those who had read and commented on previous drafts of this essay.

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com)

20 September 2023

Dear all,

Now that Helga has posted her discussant's comments and Stefan has posted his reply, I am happy to announce the seminar open for all to participate.

Cheers,

Nina

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com)

25 September 2023

Dear all,

Our ongoing e-seminar has not really kicked off yet - but please feel free to contribute at any time. Short comments and questions are also welcome. Some people have experienced problems sending mails from institutional accounts. If you are uncertain whether your email made it through, send me an email at ninagm@hum.ku.dk.

Cheers,

Nina

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com)

3 October 2023

Dear all,

Our e-seminar is now closed.

It is always difficult to predict or affect e-seminar participation, but despite this seminar never kicking off, we hope those of you who have read the paper have found it inspiring.

Thank you to Stefan Tarnowski for presenting his paper and to Helga Tawil-Souri for her insightful comments.

Our next e-seminar will run from November 14-28 and will be a book seminar on The Routledge Companion to Media Anthropology, edited by Patricia Lange, Jolyanna Sinanan, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes. John Postill has kindly agreed to guest-chair the seminar.

Cheers,

Nina